

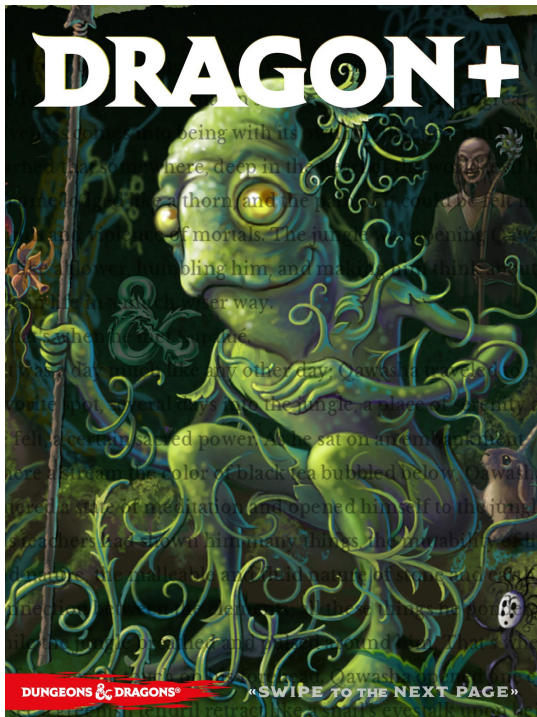
DRAGON+



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

“SWIPE TO THE NEXT PAGE”

ISSUE 16



DRAGON+ 16

Welcome to Issue 16

This issue, we look at telling stories (and stories about monsters!)



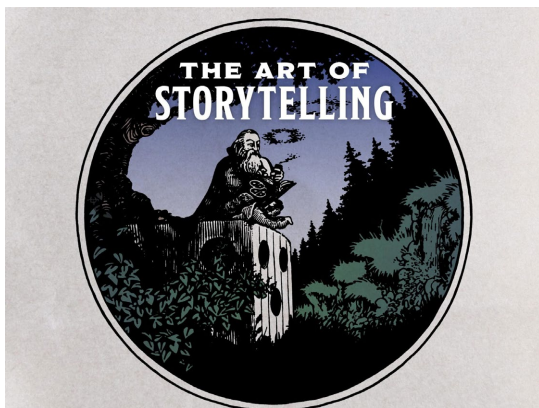
Imagining the Ampersand

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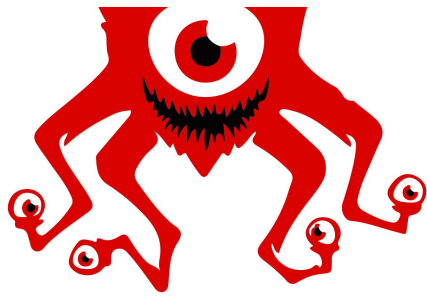


Fiction: Qawasha & Kupalué Part Two

Fiction by Adam Lee

Figuratively Speaking

WizKids' D&D Icons of the Realms: Classic Creatures Box Set updates some familiar faces, beaks and maws for a new generation.



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Behind the Screen: Driving A stake In it

How using the lessons of pop culture and literature to create stakes can enhance character and the overall roleplaying experience.



Dragon Classics

From the Dragon archives!

The Best of the Dungeon Masters Guild

Material from the Guild Adepts,



and a case of the turtles!

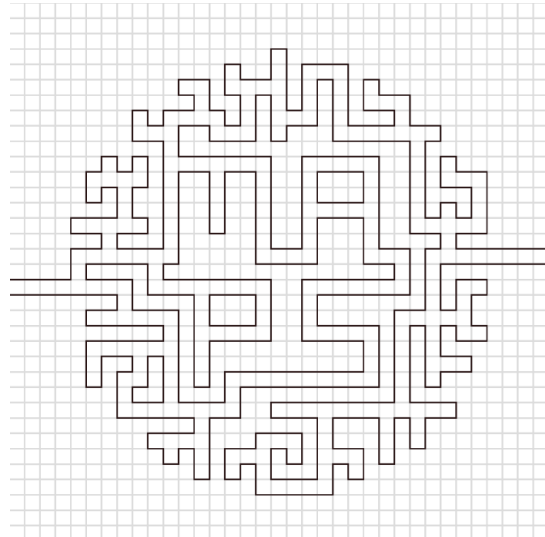
Planescape

Chronicle of The Plain of Shale



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Play Games. Buy turtles. Heal Kids!



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For this issue, we're pleased to offer a selection of maps from Storm King's Thunder

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DRAGON+ 16

Welcome to Issue 16

This issue, we look at telling stories (and stories about monsters!).

It was back in the third grade, at beloved Oak Terrace Elementary. The deal was, once you finished your assigned classwork you earned “free reading”. Granted, this may have been less of an actual incentive and more of a teaching technique to keep the classroom all working quietly together, but I didn’t care. For me, it really was a reward; I loved free reading. (Plus, read ahead and you might preemptively cover the next lesson and so earn even more free reading—it was like wishing for more wishes!).

It helped that our reading books offered a fairly wide-ranging selection—short stories, excerpts, and the like; and many with a speculative fiction bent. I remember a weird chapter from *The Phantom Tollboth*, and a pretty disturbing story from Ray Bradbury (*All Summer in a Day*). I also remember stumbling across the following chapter that began (or very nearly):

Very slowly he got up and groped about on all fours, till he touched the wall of the tunnel; but neither up nor down it could he find anything: nothing at all, no sign of goblins, no sign of dwarves. His head was swimming, and he was far from certain even of the direction they had been going in when he had his fall. He guessed as well as he could, and crawled along for a good way, till suddenly his hand met what felt like a tiny ring of cold metal lying on the floor of the tunnel.

As Tor.com **noted**, “Riddles in the Dark” appeared in a number of Chicagoland school readers, jumpstarting quite a few young fans into *The Hobbit*—and for me at least, into fantasy in general. Third grade

was also the same year when the D&D “red box” starter set appeared not only under my Christmas tree, but also those of my best friends on my street—Jeff Cauble and Steve Schierholtz. (Our street, incidentally, no longer even exists, Boles Loop having since become Fort Sheridan’s [Openlands Lakeshore Preserve](#). Time passes, I suppose).

For this issue of *Dragon+*, we’re considering the art of storytelling, and—much like my third grade experience—where it intersects with Dungeons & Dragons. We’ll be chatting with several of our noted authors, consider various story and streaming protagonists as playable characters, and ask Ethan Gilsdorf where pop culture helps drive our gaming narratives. We’ll also feature the continuing story of Qawasha and Kupalué, from R&D’s Adam Lee (with our Chultan guides gracing this issue’s cover). And of course, being late October, it’s fitting that we’ll pull some monsters into this storytelling brew as well, featuring creature stats from Beamdog’s *Planescape* and HasCon!

We hope you enjoy!



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Imagining the Ampersand

The devil is in the detail for Leah Palmer Preiss, who created the amazing cover for this issue of *Dragon+*.

Matt Chapman

“If it weren’t for deadlines, I’d probably still be working on the first project I ever started!” artist Leah Palmer Preiss jokes when we ask if it’s easy to decide when something so detailed is finished. Yet there are so many elements tucked away in her finished pieces, it’s easy to believe this kind of work could be a never-ending project. The Austin, Texas born artist, who moved around a lot with her family as a child and now resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, describes herself as a “maximalist miniaturist”. So how long does it *really* take to create each piece?

“Until the deadline!” she says again with a chuckle, before adding,

“It can really vary. I had a commission painting a few years back where I had an open-ended scope and it took me two years. It wasn’t the only thing I was working on but I was spending a lot of time on that painting.

“But if I couldn’t work quicker than that, I’d be starving! Sometimes I can do things fairly quickly, depending on how simple the concept is. However, I’m also a calligrapher and that’s the other side of my obsession, combining words and visuals. A lot of my calligraphy jobs go very quickly, which makes up for some of the craziness.



Juggernaut (select to view)

“I have a real fractalizing way of working—maybe I’ll just put this thing in between these two other things. Eventually my eyesight and ability to control my fingers comes up against a wall. But I’m not very good at knowing when to stop!”

With so much detail in your work, do you sketch individual components, or have the whole thing in mind?

The way I always start any project is with little pencil thumbnails. That helps me get a general idea and it’s the only way I can think. And also, because I am such a detail junkie, I have to make sure there’s something about an image that will hold up in a little space. If I just start putting things together it can turn into a bit of a mishmash, although it does kind of do that anyway! But at least there’s something there that can be conceptualized on a small scale. I think it’s because I’ve always been obsessed with little things. If I start really little, I can still get a focal point with some degree of normalcy.



Sketch (select to view)

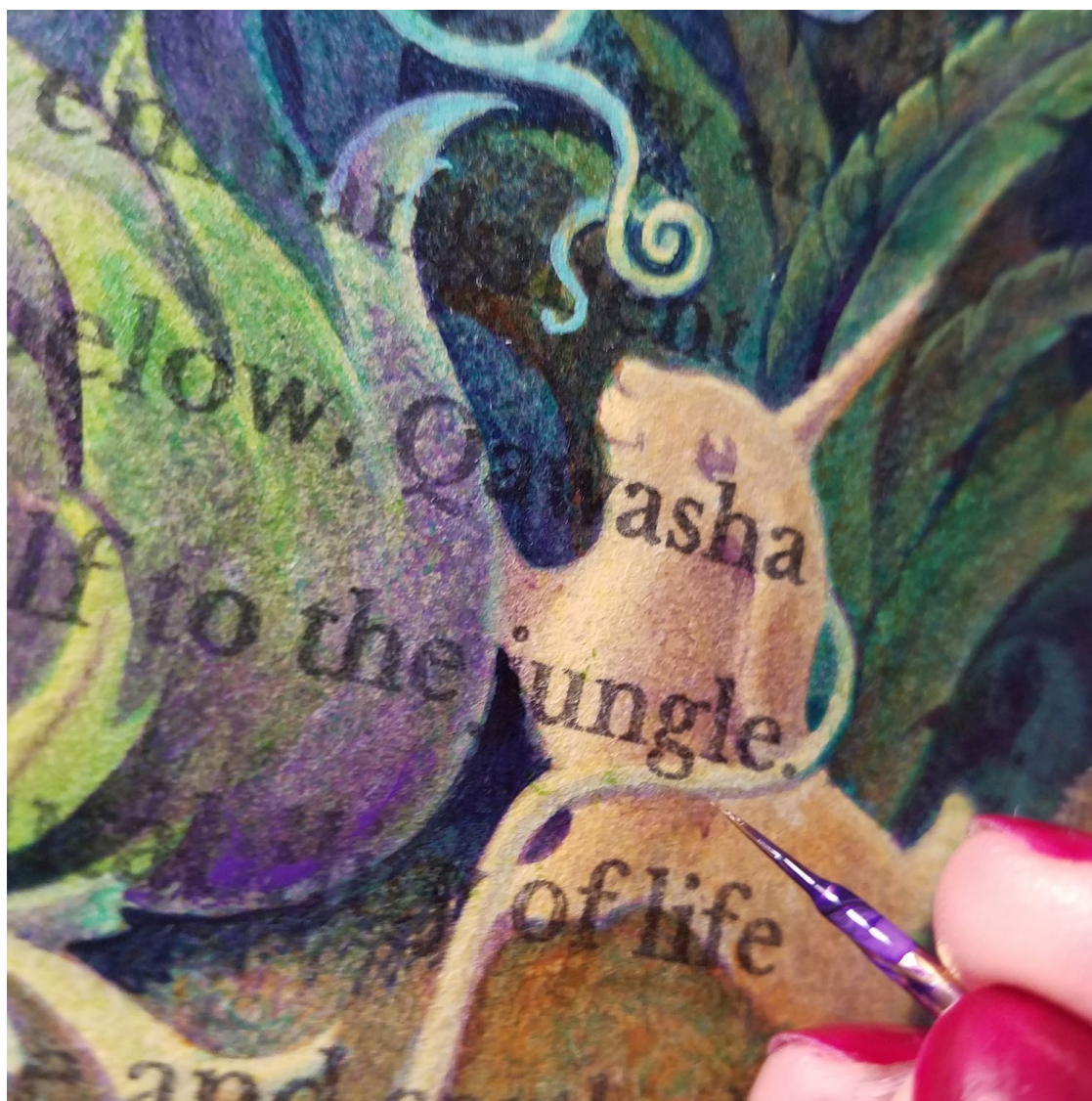
Where did you start work on the Dragon+ cover image?

The central figure was the vegpeygmy, so that was the starting point. The first pencil sketch I did was very rough. I always have a text element in my work these days, although I've always had some sort of hidden messages in my work—sometimes more obvious than others. I printed out the story segment I was sent and tried to work out how I wanted that to fit with the central figure. From there I just expanded out towards the edges, filling in everything.

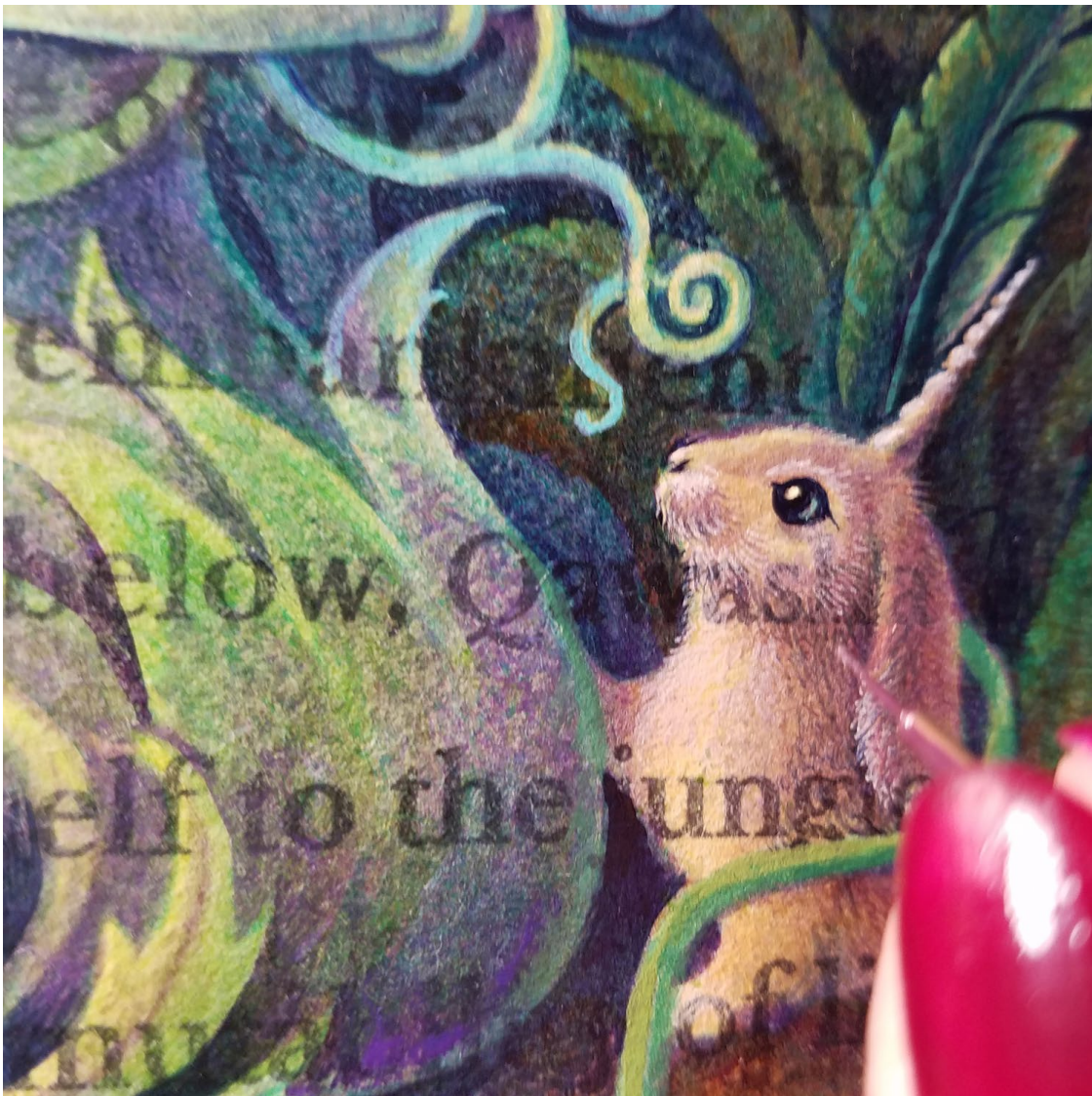
How big is the completed painting of our cover?

The painting itself is only nine by twelve inches. Like I say, I'm a

miniaturist. But there will also be some collage-type elements as part of the layout. They can be moved around a little bit to fit within the parameters of this format. I decided to do them separately that way, so there was a little more flexibility. Most of my work includes some degree of collage, text-based in this piece, where you see the story behind the illustration. The text part that is the story is actual type in this work, it's typeset, whereas in some it's painted. So I print that out and collage it onto the canvas, then paint on top of that. The larger letters, like the word Chult, are just painted on. Oftentimes, if I'm doing a piece that has various different values, I'll have to go back in and paint some of the letters to make them contrast properly. That might be to make them more legible or it might be because I want them to hide. It's a complex process.



(Select to view)



(Select to view)

You're interested in the way that words and images interact. Have you always worked with both things together?

I've always been fascinated by the combination of words and visuals. I loved books as a kid, and children's books inherently combine words and images. I started calligraphy when I was nine or ten and have been drawing since I could hold something to draw with. It just became an obsession.

Is there anything you've hidden away in a piece of work that it took someone a long time to spot?

Many, many things! I sometimes will put messages in the bark on trees or the lace on somebody's collar. It's strange because I'd say ninety per cent of people don't see those. But there's something incredibly gratifying when people do. It's one of those odd pleasing things I can't explain.

How would you describe your art style?

I've used the phrase maximalist miniaturist before, which is a quirky way to describe it. As I say, I'm obsessed with the tiny stuff, which is my favorite part, so I like to put a lot of it in there. I tend towards a form of surrealism and it's very rarely straightforward or simply representational.

Sometimes it's just an exaggeration of form but there's usually something a little odd going on there.



Do you work digitally? Your work has that kind of polished sheen to it...

I like to work in traditional media if I can manage it because I find it a lot more satisfying. I can't explain it but it's just a very different experience and I feel unsatisfied if I don't get to work with actual paint. I have always been a detail freak and I like to have all the edges really clean. While the tightness of my work has just been my nature since I started drawing as a little kid, there are some digital elements to the way that I work these days. I taught myself how to use Photoshop, and that was very exciting, as once I figured out how to use it I had the great advantage of being able to work things out in advance, before I actually plunge into the painting.

You moved around a lot when you were younger and lived in Copenhagen in Denmark...

I lived there briefly but that was an interesting experience. We moved around a lot in general but that was by far the largest adjustment I had to make. It was a Danish speaking school and I didn't speak any Danish! Luckily the Danes are very good English speakers and the teachers mostly spoke my language. But there was a culture shock moving from the US to Denmark. What's interesting is that year is one of the most vivid years of my childhood. I can remember so many details. I guess that's how it is when you're learning all of this new stuff at once.



Do you feel that had an impact on your work?

I definitely feel that drawing is a means of communication, a universal language. So I think it probably did have an influence on me. I also come from an artistic family and my mother was incredibly supportive artistically, so that had a lot of influence on me, too. My mother illustrated a children's book, so that was an inspiration, but she was artistic in general. She started an arts program in public schools where we settled, as well as running an arts program at a hospital, which was really groundbreaking. But we actually moved to Copenhagen because my father was doing his postdoc in chemistry there. His fascination with the natural world and the intricate way things interact was also a pretty major influence on me, even though I didn't follow the scientific path.

What's your experience with D&D?

I'm more of a craft-making person than a game-playing person. But my best friend from childhood and I are still very good friends to this day and she was obsessed with D&D, so I know all about it. I was intrigued by it because, of all the games back in the day, it was by far the most creative. She's a writer, so there's definitely a draw to it from that point of view. This isn't *Monopoly* we're talking about!

To see more of Leah Palmer Preiss's work, [visit her official website](#).



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Xanathar's Guide: Preview

Jason Rainville paints Xanathar and lives to tell the tale, which is more than can be said for our intrepid reporter...

Talk about the school of hard knocks. Of all the artists we've chatted to here at *Dragon+*, Jason Rainville's journey to the cover of a D&D source book took the most self-determination. Aware that he wanted to draw from a very young age, he had no idea if it was even possible to get a job as an artist, or how to go about improving his skills.



[LEARN MORE](#)

“I ended up going through schooling and college for—I’ll say it nicely—*unrelated* things, until finally I found a popular artist website called Conceptart.org,” he remembers. “The site was well known for its harsh critique, with industry professionals often wading

through the forums. It was actually a very good place for someone who either wasn't able or wasn't interested in attending art school to hone their craft and get some helpful tips. Through that I realized I wanted to be an artist in some form.

“I developed through study and practice throughout the years, until I eventually landed my first small job with a company called Rite Publishing. I kept building up and building up and eventually responded to a call for concept artists for Wizards of the Coast and they offered me *Magic: The Gathering* cards. From there I was recommended to Dungeons & Dragons, who gave me the cover job for *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*.”



(select to view)

If his path to cover glory reads like a true underdog story, his first experiences playing D&D also had something of a harsh learning curve. The fantasy and science-fiction artist from northern Ontario, Canada played a homebrew martial artist he describes as “way overpowered”. But it was this character’s mode of transport, and some vital missing details, that earned Rainville an unusual nickname.

“We had a very long first campaign, filled with squirrel familiars and people learning they were descended from dragons. I think my

favorite part was that to the DM and the rest of the players, I was the new guy. So they decided to have a little fun with me and told me if I didn't say exactly what I was doing, I didn't do it. So through a fun course of events I ended up in the middle of a lake, in a canoe, naked, with no paddle.



(select to view)

“That’s because when we were buying our items I bought a canoe, thinking that’s obviously going to come in handy. But when my first character in my first ever roleplaying game woke up, I didn’t say that I was putting on any of my clothes. When I went down to get my canoe, I didn’t say I’d taken my paddles with me. And when I launched it, I didn’t actually say how I was propelling this craft through the water. So that was my introduction from a very kind DM. It was fun. From then on I was the local legend, canoe boy. I actually got discounts in shops by miming my little paddling technique.”

STILL LIFE

“I guess the best way to describe it at this point is fantasy realism,” Rainville says when we ask him about his artistic style. “Right now I’m trying to mimic classical artists as best I can. I always like to have a mythical quality to my work and a larger-than-life quality. So I try to emphasize the old and the classic rather than the more

cinematic type of fantasy that's been going around."

Opting for a more painterly approach certainly explains the shopping trip he took before getting started on this work. Once sketches for a new commission are approved, his next step is always to start finding or shooting reference material. Nothing says classical artist like a still life featuring \$60 worth of knickknacks...

"Usually this process sees me getting dressed up in some silly costume and taking pictures of myself. This cover involved a lot of still life. I went to a beloved Canadian store called Value

Village and I found all sorts of old plates and silverware. If you look at the very right of the image, that little silver disc with a cat engraved on it is almost perfectly copied from a folding-out dessert tray. Next to that, I actually lucked out with that blue flute-looking horn, which almost exactly matches up with the D&D magic item.

"I brought all that home and physically arranged it on a table, which took about a day because I wanted to make sure it was perfect. I took a bunch of photographs of the whole thing and then some with just some individual pieces, in case some things got removed. Which they did, so I was very happy I had the foresight to do that. This reference image includes a large fish bowl with a small fish ornament inside, so I could get the skewing effect of the water correct."

Value Village sounds like our kind of store but even they didn't have an oversized figure of a beholder among their treasures. Aside from some existing images and some new concept art supplied by Wizards of the Coast, Rainville took his main inspiration from the 1987 sourcebook *Waterdeep and the North*.



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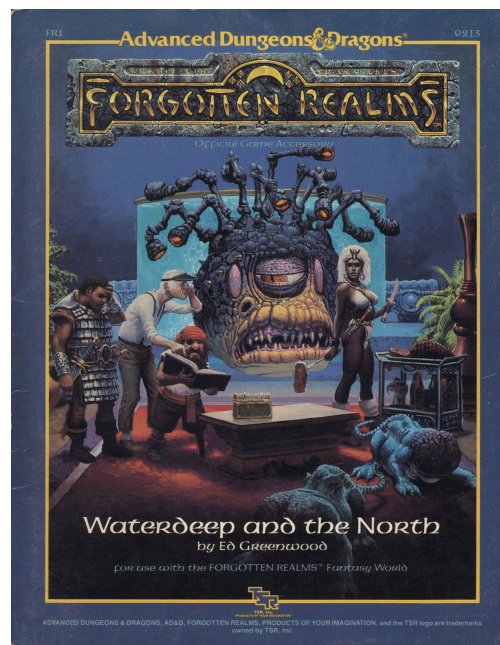


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“That has a very colorful image of Xanathar looking down on an adventurer who is trying to take some coins out of a chest. Because he is very ball-like there, I incorporated some of the body form from the concept art I was given, to flatten him out and give him more protruding features. I also did a quick sketch and marker of Xanathar’s eye and the skin pattern around it to see how it would stretch around the bowl. I stayed pretty close to that version of Xanathar because this was my first beholder and I didn’t want to overstep my bounds.”

No fear of that, as Rainville has captured his subject magnificently. We’re sure insatiable collector Xanathar would love the artist’s two covers for Hans Cummings books (*Wings of Twilight* and *Iron First of the Oroqs*). He might also find a place among his treasures for *Lamentations of the*

Flame Princess, an English Civil War-era RPG Rainville also created the cover for. But clapping all of his eyes on *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, including that representation of his beloved pet fish Sylgar, we think the Beholder would give this artist the ultimate accolade and let him live. At least until he got hungry...



(Select to view)

To see more of Jason Rainville's amazing art, [visit his official website](#).

Our intrepid reporter ventured into the Underdark to get an exclusive, career-defining interview with The Xanathar! If the scorched outline we found next to the parchment containing these answers in anything to judge by, "career-ending" might be a more appropriate description...

Hi Xanathar, how are you today?

Greetings, minion! I am perfect every day, of course. You ask strange questions. Should I not be as perfect today as I was yesterday? Do you have some secret planned? Know that if you do, I shall discover your plan and disintegrate you. Or maybe turn you to stone. I suppose I could charm you, and make you tell me your secret plan. So many options... Continue the interview while I ponder.

You've been around for quite a while, are you the original Xanathar or is the title passed on?

Are you implying that I should die soon, or that I am lying when I say that I am the only Xanathar? I shall paralyze you for a while and let you think about your answer.

What's your top tip for anyone visiting Waterdeep for the first time? Water what? Oh, the place up above with all the little minions in it. Never been there.

Who's the most dangerous person in Waterdeep? And on the Sword Coast as a whole?
Me. And me.

How does a crime lord relax in his spare time?
Who has spare time? Work, work, work, all the time. Minions can so rarely do things right, and I'm always having to disintegrate them and get new ones. You are a people, right? What skills do you have that might make you a good minion?

You like to thwart adventurers whenever possible. Do you have a favorite trap? Or a favorite beastie to ambush them with?
By "thwart" you mean eat, right? I don't make traps. I have minions do all the fiddly work with... hands, or whatever you use. I do like to keep a few petrified friends around and release them from petrification when I have unwanted visitors, though. That umber hulk "statue" behind you, for example.

What advice would you give to adventurers heading into the Underdark?
Nothing at all. What a ridiculous notion.

You strive to know everything. Are there any strange actions the above-ground two-leg beings do that are beyond your comprehension?
Strive? Never. I already know everything. All the important things anyway. People are strange though. You come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. And you live with each other, which is disgusting, by the way. I mean, I keep a few minions around do my bidding, sure. But you actually live in little rooms with little—what do you call it? Furniture, right. I mean, take sitting down for example. That is just totally weird. But I guess that's what you have to do when you can't fly.

What's the strangest thing you've discovered about them?
Pants. Have you ever really thought about them? It's two tubes that join into one tube at the top, and then you stick your leg-things into the one tube so they come out of the two tubes. Why not just use two

tubes?

What's tastier: a cleric, a ranger, a fighter, a mage or a thief?
Why choose? I suppose I might have disintegrated one and then I wouldn't be able to eat it. But then some more come along and you disintegrate another one. Variety in your diet is the key to good health.

As a crime lord, are you one of the Lords of Waterdeep? You can tell us, we won't squeal!


I am a Lord of Waterdeep, of course. I'm supposed to kill you if you find out, but that can wait until after the interview. No. No need to get up. I can see you all where you are.


Is that the same goldfish you've always had?
Sylgar? Of course. Sylgar is my little schmuky-ookums. He's so cute! Oh, I'm sorry Sylgar, I meant handsome. I really did. Don't be mad. Yes, you are a very handsome fish... Where was I? Right. Let's see, how old is Sylgar now? I think he's 57. Is that old for a goldfish? Well, he is very special.

How can you be sure a hapless minion didn't accidentally kill it and replace it with one very similar?

How dare you suggest such a thing in front of Sylgar? How would you feel if I casually referred to someone killing you? I mean, someone other than me—because it is of course an honor to be slain by The Xanathar. Speaking of which, is this interview over?

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TALES FROM  CANDLEKEEP

TOMB OF ANNIHILATION

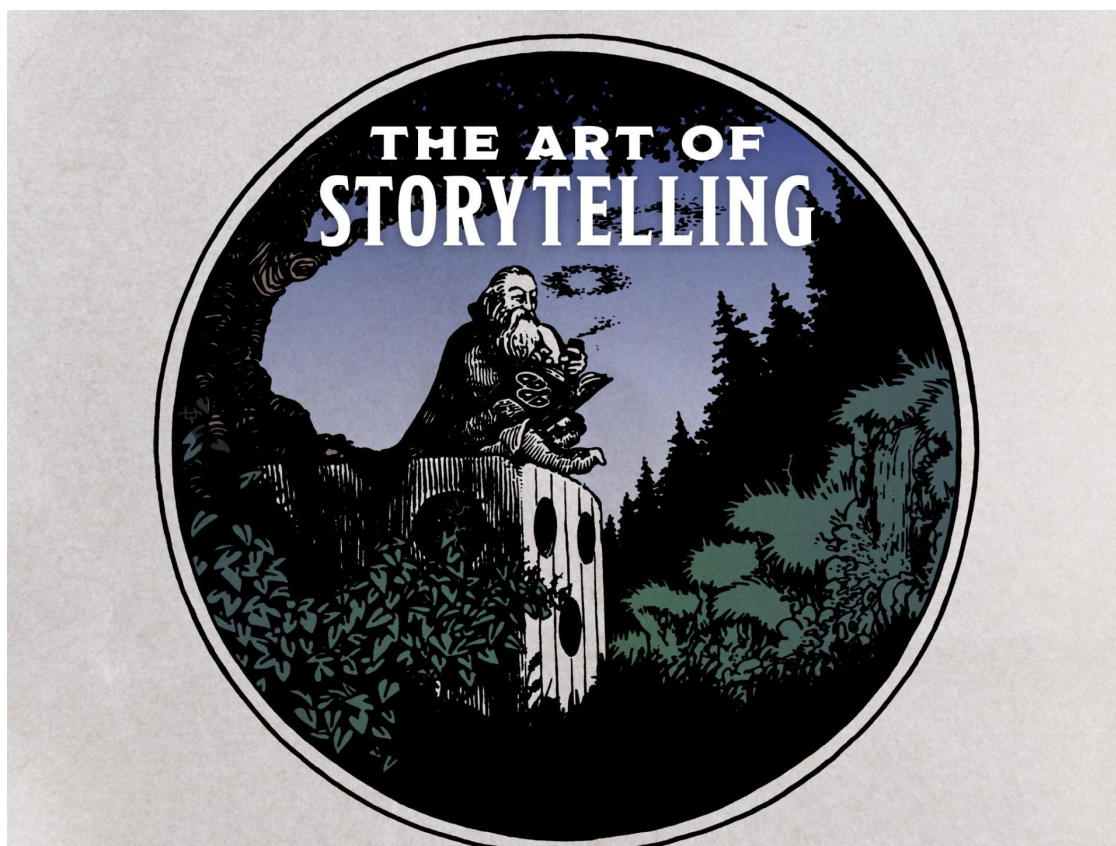
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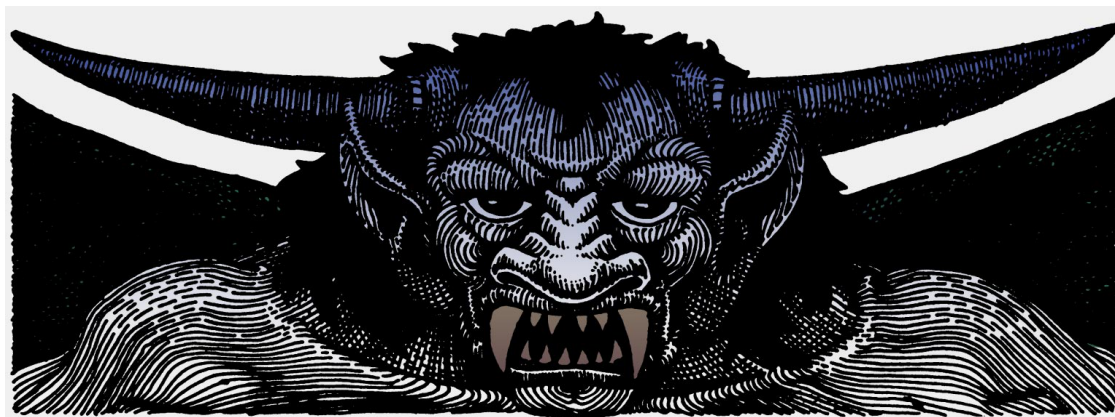


STEAM®



The Art of Storytelling

Bards Richard Baker, Bruce R. Cordell, Erin M. Evans, Ed Greenwood, Lev Grossman, R.A. Salvatore and Cameron Tofer discuss the rich links between storytelling and D&D...



heater of the mind: the ability to create a living, breathing world based solely on the descriptions of another. It's a phrase that

T applies as easily to reading a novel as it does to playing a game of Dungeons & Dragons. While our conversations with *Dragon+* readers suggest you regularly participate in both of those pastimes, it's interesting to discover how the people weaving those tales came to find their calling. Did the writer/storyteller come first, having always been buried deep within them? Or did the D&D/RPG player take the creative environment they found themselves inhabiting and run with those urges?

“For me, what came first was being a reader. My grade school library was filled with a host of wonderful science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction, back when ‘YA’ were called ‘Juveniles’,” says Bruce R Cordell. “At the same time, my mother’s habit was to bring home two sci-fi books from the public library every two weeks. I’d also read them, not really knowing they were above my level. So I was exposed to a wide variety of styles, without having developed the ability to judge anything. I just accepted it all.”

“I started writing almost as soon as I could read and write, and was a ‘published’ writer by age five or so, a good decade before Dungeons & Dragons, the first roleplaying game, came along,” recalls Ed Greenwood. “When I first encountered D&D, I’d already published a novel, some poems, and about three dozen short stories. In school, from the earliest grades, I and my classmates had to read classic literature, perform Shakespeare scenes, and give accounts of class trips and experiences aloud—sometimes to the assembled school or an audience of parents. On top of that, camping came with a rich tradition of fireside ghost stories late at night. So I was both a writer and storyteller long before anyone was a roleplaying gamer.”



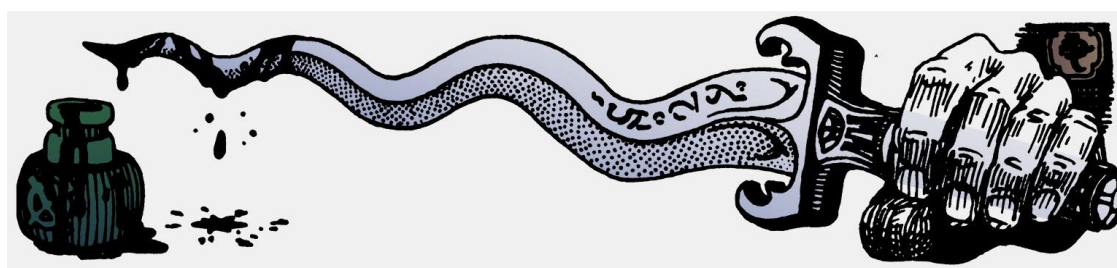
Ed Greenwood

“For me it was the writing, but not by much,” agrees R.A. Salvatore. “I was in college and found my love of storytelling in February 1978,

trapped in my mom's house after a huge blizzard shut everything down for a week. I had a Christmas gift from my sister, a copy of *The Hobbit* and a slipcover set of *The Lord of the Rings*. Reading those books that week reminded me of a kid who used to love to read and write, so I changed my major when I got back to school. I began playing D&D a couple of years later, and found it to be a wonderful and much-needed outlet for my creativity.”

Just when it seems the author is always buried deep within a storyteller, there are those who found their calling *after* playing D&D. “Definitely the player,” says Lev Grossman. “I didn’t really get serious about writing, or storytelling of any kind, till college. And I didn’t get any good at writing till I was in my 30s.”

“Taking the question literally, the D&D player came first. I drew dungeons on graph paper before I tried to write stories,” adds Richard Baker. “I started playing D&D in sixth grade, and I don’t recall any serious attempt to write a story until sometime in high school. But I think the better answer is that for as long as I can remember I’ve been an avid fan of fantasy and science fiction, and I eagerly consumed it in every format available. Sometimes that was in book form, sometimes in the form of imagining my characters exploring monster-filled dungeons, and sometimes it was movies or cartoons or video games. For me, reading *The Hobbit* and discovering the Dungeons & Dragons game and seeing *Star Wars* all happened within a few wonderful months. I’ve always had a super-active imagination and the storyteller’s been there all along.”



CREATIVE DIFFERENCES

With novels and tabletop RPGs offering a crossover in the way they’re constructed, you might expect the methods employed by those creating such adventures to be very similar. However, a closer examination reveals that is not always the case.

“I write in a wide variety of styles, formats, and voices, both for fun and due to the needs of individual projects,” says Greenwood of his more traditional written work. “But as a Dungeon Master, I’m doing what I can to unfold a collaborative story, led by the players and largely created by the players. I play the setting with which the characters interact.”

“When you write fiction, you know who the protagonist is and you know what decisions he or she makes,” adds Baker. “When you write an RPG adventure—especially one that will be played by a DM and a group of players that you don’t know—you have no idea who the characters are, how much motivation they’ll need, and whether they go right or left when they come to the fork in the road. You have to approach an adventure as a story toolkit that you provide to the DM. From that toolkit, the group build their own story starring their own heroes.”



Erin M Evans

Erin M. Evans points to a wider shift between the two processes that she admits can be tricky for writers to wrap their heads around at first. When it comes to differentiating between novels and adventures, she suggests the key decider is point of view. “I’ve worked with authors who started out as RPG writers, and often you could spot that background because their main character wouldn’t have a very strong point of view,” she tells *Dragon+*. “You wouldn’t get to see a lot of the protagonist’s experience, emotions or ideals in what they were observing, and they end up feeling like a camera man. You also see that the secondary characters, who you don’t see the world through, are really interesting—these are cool NPCs. But the person whose story this is meant to be is a little bit empty.”

Evans says that point of view is a key driver, depending on the format. For her, everything they see shapes the story, sometimes in

unexpected ways if you apply the rules of novels to an RPG campaign. “If the main character in a novel is looking at the gates of a city, the details that character picks out will tell you about their relationship to the city, the government, and the geography,” says Evans. “When you’re writing an RPG, there’s a certain sterility but it’s a really desirable thing. Because you’re working with your players to tell this story, and if you just said, ‘Here’s how you feel about that’, or you imply it really heavily, you’re steering them in a way that’s not always what you want. You want them to be able to make their own decisions and flesh out their character.”

The randomness of a role-playing game is also rarely replicated in a novel, which is structured to build excitement as it heads towards a climax. You can’t just throw a wandering monster in there for no reason, as you would in a roleplaying game, or people will notice.

“My friend was talking about this *Weird West* novel she had read,” remembers Evans. “In it, they are moving through a cave system and they encounter a giant scorpion, which they fight, although it doesn’t matter. And with a novel, *everything* has to matter. Everything you add should shift the direction of the story. If it’s not doing that, people will say, ‘What was up with that giant scorpion?’”



DIFFERENT YET THE SAME

“On the bright side, some elements of the creative process are pretty similar,” suggests Baker. “For example, both stories and adventures need a setting, a villain, a plot, and a great ‘payoff’. When you think up great set-piece encounters or interesting bad guys, you’re creating elements that would also fit into a good action story. And DMs who pay attention to the PCs’ backstories and look for ways to advance those player-created storylines—perhaps even resolve them someday—are delivering an experience not all that different from what we try to provide as novelists.”

“Story creation can be very different when writing as opposed to roleplaying around the table. Yet they’re the same in that they strive

for entertainment, and to engage or invest the reader or player, by giving them moral and tactical choices to make, or to read about characters you've tried to make them care about making, as the story unfolds," agrees Greenwood. "In the end, we share stories with each other to soothe and amuse, to explain the world and our lives in it to each other, and to share in collective experiences."

With so much being similar between tabletop game creation and story writing, it's interesting to note those times when a character, plot line or idea has crossed from one world to the other. But is the creative process behind a story more likely to spark something in-game, or is an in-game event or character likely to become embedded within a novel?

"I was in a lucky and privileged position to be both an author of several Forgotten Realms products, and a Forgotten Realms novel author. So I constantly cross-pollinated my stories with game design I'd done, and vice versa," says Cordell.

Greenwood also says he deliberately tried things out at the gaming table as a way of playtesting things in his early days at TSR. "That included new monsters, spells, magic items, and details of the Realms at the behest of the staff designers at TSR. I often wrote fictional characters, dialogue, in-the-Realms written missives, and other lore details as fiction, then slipped them into game play to see the result. One of the habits I briefly fell into, when TSR's published version of the Realms was just getting going, was to write brief short stories, or single-scene vignettes, of major characters facing some crisis or other, such as Szass Tam, Elaith 'the Serpent' Craulnober, Manshoon, Elminster, and many others. This brought them to life so anyone reading that fiction could turn around and portray them at the gaming table, or in the novel or short story they were writing, in pretty much the same way as I had, to keep the Realms as consistent as possible. So lots of stuff went back and forth, deliberately. I create the Realms at the gaming table *and* at the keyboard, not ranking one above the other."



CHARACTER STUDY

It seems characters in particular have a way of leaping from their pencil marks on printed sheets into every other kind of storytelling. One prime example is the beloved companions Minsc, Edwin, and Xan from the *Baldur's Gate* video games. They have risen to iconic status over the years but their inspiration came from a pen-and-paper campaign that began around 1993. James Ohlen of BioWare was the DM, and Cameron Tofer, Beamdog co-founder, joined the group a few months after the game began. His character? A fierce ranger named Minsc.

“I was playing a lot of *Civilization* at the time and I played the Russians, and so Minsc was named after the city,” Tofer explains. “He was based off some horrible rolls—his Intelligence, I just fumbled that. And because I joined late I was a couple of levels behind everyone, so Minsc was knocked out in the first round of pretty much every fight.”



Bruce R Cordell

However, this level disparity also led Tofer to create one of the most adored animal familiars of all time. “When I finally levelled up enough to get a companion, that’s

how I got Boo. Boo was the only character I could play because Minsc was always knocked out.”

It doesn’t take much to tease other TRPG connections from our group of sages, with almost everyone admitting to taking an in-game character and dropping them into their stories. Some of the more memorable examples are particularly overblown, but work perfectly in their novels.

“I had a friend who played a dwarf cleric and was fond of strapping a keg of oil to his back, casting *resist fire* on himself and blowing himself up in combat. I replicated that somewhat with Bruenor in *Streams of Silver*,” Salvatore reveals. “However, the only character of mine who came from the game is Oliver deBurrows, the highway halfling from *The Sword of Bedwyr* and the *Crimson Shadow Trilogy*. Oliver is a cross between Inigo Montoya from the *Princess Bride* and the Frenchman on the wall in *Monty Python’s Holy Grail*. I played him because I wanted to make sure I could make him annoying enough to work in the book. When he died, the others cheered, so into the book he went!”



R.A Salvatore

Baker says the best example of a character from a game session making into his novel was in *City of Ravens*. In one scene, protagonist Jack Ravenwild decides to bluff his way into the wizard’s guild by assuming the ridiculous larger-than-life persona of Dread Delgath, referring to himself constantly in the third person.

“That whole Dread Delgath bit comes from a D&D game I ran at MonteCon many years ago—a third edition adaptation of the old first edition adventure called *Slave Pits of the Undercity*. I made new versions of the ‘pregen’ PCs in the old module, including Delgath. My friend and WotC colleague Scott James Magner played Dread Delgath with exceptional flamboyance, booming out lines in third-person like, ‘Who dares to defy the Dread Delgath?’ and ‘The Dread

Delgath requires a healing potion!’ It was absolutely hilarious, so I wrote it into the book.”



FEEDBACK LOOP

With both creative processes producing something for an audience, we can't help wondering which is worse: submitting a manuscript to be read, or leading a new adventure for your friends for the first time?

“Both are nerve-wracking,” explains Cordell. “In a writer’s group, going chapter by chapter of the latest novel is an exercise in laying yourself bare to criticism. But whenever I write a new adventure, playtesting offers the same sort of feeling. Everyone’s looking out for things that aren’t working. So it’s a bit stressful, as the designer. But without playtesting or reader groups to help you zero in on where you’ve gone wrong, you can’t improve your game design or story. You’ve got to swallow that fear and stress, simply smile, and move forward. And it’s worth it. After you’ve taken the criticism, adjusted the game design or manuscript, it’s a good feeling knowing your friends have helped you make it better.”

However, most of our bards claim the finished novel is the harder challenge, even if they have since overcome their fears of both potential embarrassments.

“Sending out a manuscript for reading is worse,” says Baker.

“First, it represents a lot more work—a good-sized adventure is about 10,000 to 50,000 words in length, but a novel is more like 80,000 to 110,000, and sometimes even longer. There’s more work at stake if you had a serious misstep



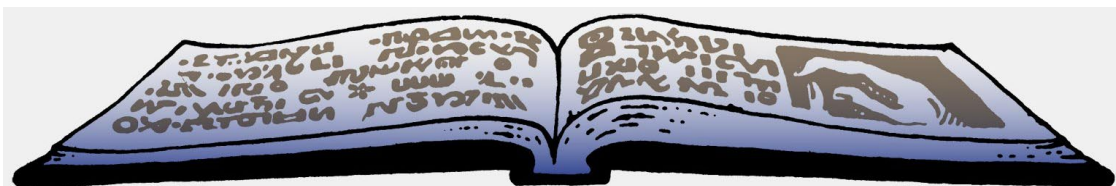
Richard Baker

along the way.

“Second, I’ve got a lot of experience in evaluating adventures and I can generally anticipate how most of the scenes will play at the table. But a novel is a murkier beast, and it’s harder to sense when you’re doing something great or something ordinary.”

“Well, the former, of course, and by a long shot—at least in the beginning. That was how I was feeding my kids, after all!” agrees Salvatore, although experience has long since stripped that fear of submitting manuscripts. “Now, neither are nerve-wracking. At all. I’ve found the freedom to just enjoy my writing as much as my playing, and so nerves are simply no longer part of the equation.”

“Neither wracks my nerves; it’s all good fun,” says Greenwood, before adding. “I would say the manuscript is the greater challenge, because if I’m gaming for my friends, we already know each other’s likes, dislikes, enthusiasms, and playing styles, so my adventure is tailored to all of that. Moreover, we’re almost always plunging back into an ongoing campaign or extended adventure, picking up where we left off.”



LICENSED TO SKILL

A final benefit of indulging in both of these art forms is the potential exchange of skills. But which way is the transfer most pronounced? Has participating in the creation of written stories and playable

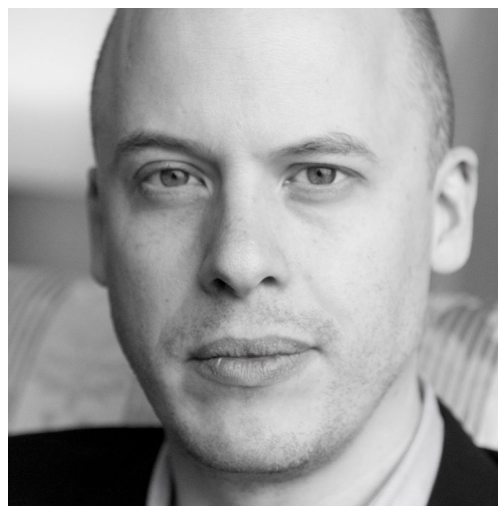
campaigns made our bards better storytellers? Or have their story skills been honed to make them better DMs and players?

Cordell says, even just in terms of character design, the two processes have a lot of beneficial crossover. “Coming up with interesting traits for a character you’re playing in an RPG game, whether it’s your own character or an NPC as a DM, has a lot in common with creating interesting characters when writing a short story or a novel. In the latter case, all the trappings of sci-fi or fantasy and the plots that go with them are awesome, but without interesting and hopefully noteworthy characters, the story will fall flat.”

Baker agrees that character is such an important part of the puzzle that it cannot be ignored. “I think that writing adventures is a particularly tricky form of writing—branching narratives that recombine naturally to a great payoff scene aren’t easy to do. My work in designing adventures certainly gave me lots of practice in some pretty challenging plot creation. But coming up with an interesting plot is really just half the job of telling a good story; when you’re writing fiction, characters are what your readers identify with and cheer for—or against! If you come up with a fascinating, well-paced plot but the reader just doesn’t care whether the hero succeeds or fails, well, it’s probably not going to be a very good story.”

Grossman’s takeaway from his hours at the tabletop are slightly different. For him, the nuts and bolts of his adventures played into making his writing more realistic.

“The important part for me was having to think through how fictional, fantastical things actually work in a serious, practical, realistic way. I don’t honestly think Tolkien ever thought much about the fine mechanics of, say, Gandalf’s spellcasting. He was fine leaving it in the realm of legend. But these days fantasy is held to the same standards of specificity and granularity as realist fiction, so you have work everything out, the same way Hemingway worked out, say, a



Lev Grossman

bullfight.

“Playing D&D forced me to look at the precise details of what would or wouldn’t be possible, and what it feels like to cast cleric spells versus magic-user spells, for example. Or what does it feel like for a thief to find a trap? Or a monk to take a fall? You can’t write serious fantasy without thinking about all that stuff, and D&D forced me to think about that for the first time.”

“I think roleplaying and writing skills—and really, *experience*—aid each other. Each can help you get better at the other storytelling form,” says Greenwood. “Roleplaying gives you practice in letting a story ‘breathe,’ giving its characters freedom to do the unexpected, and in vividly but *briefly* imparting surroundings and setting. It also provides ongoing practice in pacing an unfolding narrative.

“Story skills make you better as a DM at bringing characters and surroundings to life, and making them convincing. An experienced storyteller knows what to leave out, too, to heighten the stakes and urgency and move precious at-the-table gaming time to the juicy encounters and scenes everyone wants to savor.”



(Select to view)

Click the links to learn more about [Richard Baker](#), [Bruce R Cordell](#), [Erin M Evans](#), [Ed Greenwood](#), [Lev Grossman](#), [R.A. Salvatore](#), and [Cameron Tofer](#) and to see the latest works by these eminent bards.



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Spider Shark

Creation of a new D&D monster—straight from the HasCon participants!

Mike Mearls, Chris Lindsay, Richard Whitters

Over the years, there have been any number of odd, offbeat, or downright bizarre monsters created to populate the game's dungeons. Yes, we're clearly looking at you, owlbear. As the theory goes, a demented wizard created the first specimen by crossing a giant owl with a bear.

At this year's HasCon (September 8-10 in Providence, RI), fans got a chance to become their own demented wizard! As part of the Monster Building Panel, Mike Mearls and Chris Lindsay led participants

through the process to create a new D&D creature, illustrated along the way by Richard Whitters.

We applaud your creation, and here now is the fully statted spider shark!

Spider Shark

Large monstrosity, neutral

Armor Class

18 (natural)

Hit Points

162 (13d12 + 78)

Speed

30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16(+3)	17(+3)	16(+3)	4(-3)	14(+2)	8(-1)

Skills

Perception

Perception +5, Stealth +6

Senses

Blindsight 60 ft.

Languages

—

Challenge

9

Spider Climb

The spider shark can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Web Sense

While in contact with a web, the spider shark knows the exact location of any other creature in contact with the same web.

Web Walker

The spider shark ignores movement restrictions caused by webbing.

Actions

Multiattack

Can make a hooked claw attack, a burrowing tooth attack, and a barbed web attack.

Burrowing Tooth Attack

Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 16 (3d8+3) damage and make a successful Constitution saving throw DC 18 or take an additional 4 (1d8) damage at the beginning of your turn each round. You can make an additional saving throw at the end of your turn each round to negate this effect.

Hooked Claw Attack

Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 12 (2d8+3) damage and make a successful Strength saving throw DC 18 or be grappled and pulled toward the creature. Grappled creatures grant Advantage on attacks.

Barbed Web Attack

Ranged Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, range 90 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 18 (3d10+2) damage plus the target is restrained by webbing. As an action, the restrained target can make a DC 18 Strength check, bursting the webbing on a success. The webbing can also be attacked and destroyed (AC 15; hp 25; vulnerability to fire damage; immunity to bludgeoning, poison, and psychic damage).

Web Net Attack (Recharge 5 – 6)

Dexterity save DC 16 to avoid. Range 90 ft., 30 ft. radius. *Hit:* 18 (3d10+2) damage plus the targets are restrained by webbing. As an action, the restrained target can make a DC 18 Strength check, bursting the webbing on a success. The webbing can also be attacked and destroyed (AC 15; hp 25; vulnerability to fire damage; immunity to bludgeoning, poison, and psychic damage).

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Figuratively Speaking

WizKids' D&D Icons of the Realms: Classic Creatures Box Set updates some familiar faces, beaks and maws for a new generation.

Mark Bonington

A glance through the work of artist **Richard Whitters** reveals the strange and fantastical creatures crawling around the dark dungeons of his mind. Some have slithered their way onto *Magic: The Gathering* cards, while others fly onto the pages of Dungeons & Dragons in his role as senior art director. Having told *Dragon+* that he doesn't really separate out drawing for profession and passion, we're sure there are dozens more still hidden away in their paper chambers, waiting for a chance to be unleashed.

They'll have to wait a little longer to make their escape. His latest task wasn't to give life to those newly imagined horrors but to step back in time and revitalise some classic monsters. For its new range of miniatures, WizKids has gone all the way back to the earliest source material and plundered first edition D&D, offering Whitters the chance to rework these vintage beasts. With such iconic creatures to choose from, how did he decide which legendary figures were ripe

for a makeover?

“I picked creatures which have actually evolved from then until now,” he explains. “A pegasus or a unicorn might be interesting, but nothing about them says ‘old school D&D’. The displacer beast has also remained pretty much unchanged over the years, so there wouldn’t be much to show there in an update. I also tried to choose creatures that were unique to D&D, such as the boar-headed orcs.

“The old art in first edition always reminded me of those sketches by early explorers. They didn’t get the giraffe or the rhinoceros quite right, but they captured this feeling of exploration and amazement. I tried to keep the major design elements intact and then add a layer of realism. So I gave the orcs stubby, pig-like fingers. And while Demogorgon still has his spindly bird-like legs, I tried to make them look functional.”



1st Edition Ogre

To look at the evolution of the monsters in Dungeons & Dragons is to look at the evolution of D&D itself. Whitters says first edition leaned heavily on the design aesthetic of 1200s Europe, with second edition looking more towards the Renaissance and even adding elements of art deco, as the designers wrestled with what this world looked like.

“Third edition was really the first time the game had a very tight look and feel to it. Some fans refer to this as the ‘dungeonpunk’ look, for good or for ill, but it generally showed D&D maturing in its approach,” he says. “Fourth edition had solid visual execution, but sometimes lacked that D&D feeling. The execution of the art tightened, but the heart of the brand didn’t shine through as much, at times. I think fifth edition is where everything coalesced into its best form to date.”

ORIGINAL



During those revisions from first to fifth edition, it's also noticeable how many of the old gender and cultural stereotypes, often too prevalent in fantasy art, have been left behind. Whitters agrees: "For sure the old stuff had a huge deficit in that way. I love archetypes, the embodiment of human ideals and thoughts, but I dislike stereotypes, as they are typically more negative or two-dimensional ideas. Those are my own definitions, but you get the idea."

"We try and show that more positive spirit in everything we do, and try to include everyone in the fun. Our game is about everyone working together to explore and achieve great things. We never split the party!"

One of the challenges on a project that involves so much looking back was not to get caught up in the nostalgia of the original work. "That movie we watched in the '80s doesn't always hold up when we watch it again today, but you still have that feeling for it, that need to revisit it. Bridging that gap is a huge part of the job. We take what our audience wants seriously, and we do a lot of research—the bulk of which is done by Matt Sernett, our lore master. We have so many new fans, and in doing this I want them to get a piece of what I got from the game 30 years ago."

A Cultured Approach

Upgrading the images from their basic black-and-white drawings doesn't stop at the art itself. Before the first strokes go onto the page, the wider culture of the creature needs to be considered and fleshed out, in order to turn these early visions into the fully-rounded creatures they've now become.

"The diversity of characters and cultures not only serves our wildly diverse audience, it also gives a sense of exploration," Whitters says as he explains his approach. "If a culture is in a remote location, and has a small population, it probably strays more towards the Dark Ages, or even further back. This means a remotely located culture might have more of a Viking level of advancement. If the population is large and diverse, such as Waterdeep, you stray more towards Renaissance.

"These are both European references, of course, but the same idea applies. Are we using the Mongols as a reference, or is it the Ming Dynasty of China? A huge thing we try to do is to remain respectful to various cultures. Also, as you research history you inevitably find a treasure trove of ideas. Such as, what if China had *actual* dragons? And how did Celtic myth handle fey creatures?"



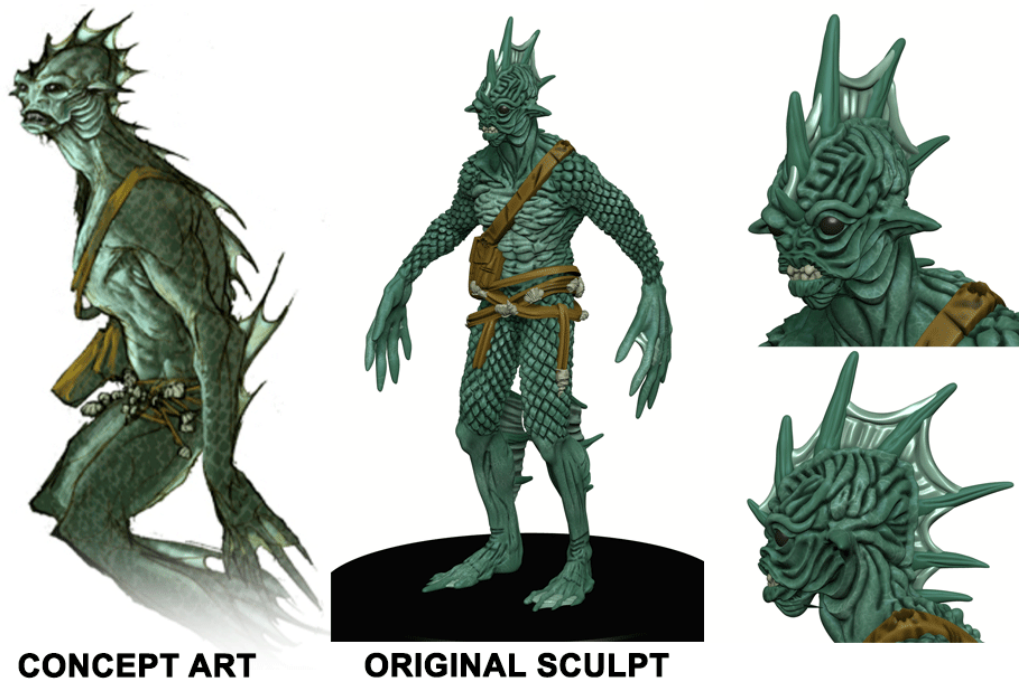
1st Edition Sahuagin

With all of that in mind, which creatures were the easiest to re-interpret for 2017? And which held the most challenges?

"The easiest was the purple worm. It had this lumpy, odd, toothy, lamprey eel design that is still a lot of fun, and it didn't really need to change. In fact, I realized that if I changed that design too much, I would lose that 'old school' feeling.

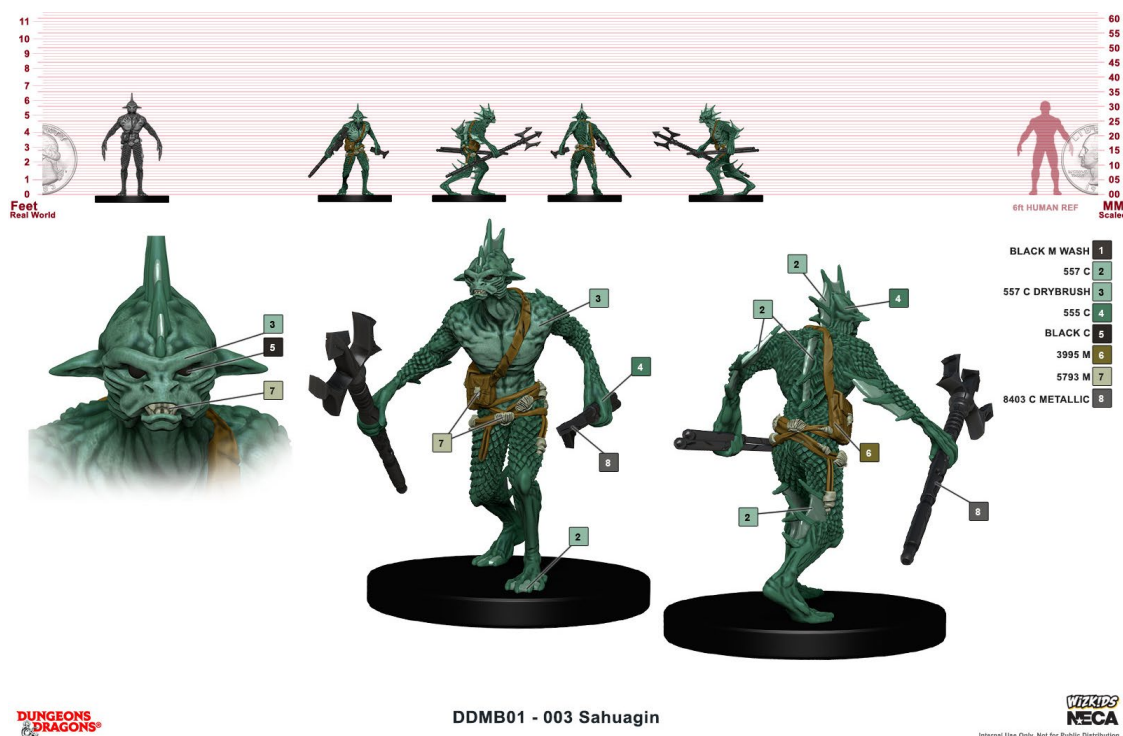
"The hardest was the sahuagin. I struggled to add a realistic touch while keeping that 'from the deeps' Lovecraftian fish-man feeling. The sahuagin have evolved quite a bit from that period, so it was a bit

of a struggle. The ogre magi always had the feel of an Oni from Japan, so that was a lot of fun. And the boar-headed orcs were, of course, classic D&D foes, so I was excited to do those first.”



Job Satisfaction

“I think I can give one piece of general advice to any creator, whether a visual artist, writer, or whatever,” Whitters shares when we ask if he has any tips for those looking to follow in his footsteps. “In all likelihood, the thing that you love to do the most is what you will become best at, so pursue it, even when it’s tough. Show everyone what you can do!”



(Select to view)

Did he ever think he would be involved with Dungeons & Dragons all those years ago when he first played the game? “It’s weird; at some point in this job you realize that this thing that inspired you as a kid is in your hands. That can be scary for a moment. But then you stop and say, ‘Let’s make it fun!’”

“Truth be told, I was working on these retro sketches in my spare time before this project even came up. I just love the idea. In high school, my friend Matt would pick monsters from the original AD&D manual and say, ‘Redraw that one!’ So this is the same idea, except we get cool minis into the bargain.

“There were versions of these creatures done many years ago, typically in lead and pewter, and they were unpainted. But this set gives us a chance to put painted minis in the hands of current fans. I also like that, to old and new fans alike, it shows the long history of the game and gives some of the original vision.”

With these fabulous WizKids figures out in November, can we expect more classic creatures to follow? “Definitely!” Whitters promises. “I’m working on more as we speak. Obviously the extent to which we run with it is based on the reception by the fans. But I will re-do the whole lot of them if given the chance!”



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Fiction: Qawasha & Kupalué Part Two

Fiction by Adam Lee

It was a sign from Ubtao.

Qawasha went back to the spot where he had met with the vegepygmy for several months, learning how to communicate with the creature—deciphering the strange combination of hissing, clicks, and gestures that conveyed its unique consciousness. At first, the creature’s language confounded Qawasha, but after opening his mind and carefully listening, he began to see a unique point of view coming from a vastly different perspective than his own.

Qawasha had heard of vegepygmyes—fungal creatures born of the russet mold rumored to have been brought to the world by a falling star—and now found himself fast becoming friends with one. Although the vegepygmy seemed to have little concern about itself as an individual, Qawasha called his new friend Kupalué, or ‘Weed That Walks’ in his own native language. It was a way for Qawasha to bring Kupalué into his world, and Kupalué seemed to find that acceptable.

He would walk with Kupalué through the forest in silence. Every now and then, the vegepygmy would stop as if to listen, his fungal tendrils testing the air, and then continue on as if satisfied with the state of things. When it became too dark to continue, they would set up a crude lean-to under a great tree, then sit and talk. On one such night, Kupalué expressed intrigue with the concept of magic. At first, he had shown intense apprehension when Qawasha conjured a flame in the palm of his hand to show his friend this strange energy. But Kupalué’s fear soon melted and turned to fascination.

It was spoken to me. Kupalué gestured at the magical fire whose light and heat pierced the jungle gloom, wincing when he got too close.
But I did not believe.

Kupalué



In turn, Qawasha was fascinated by his friend in many ways. For one, Kupalué walked very slowly and with perfect balance no matter how rough the terrain, which made Qawasha slow himself to the same

deliberate pace. Because of this, the experience of the forest changed for Qawasha. Every tree became more significant. There was time to look closely at the textures and colors of their bark, to feel their still presence as the two passed around their immense trunks. The trees moved for no one. And they were home to many creatures—both plant and animal—who lived their entire lives under their great boughs. Qawasha realized that by slowing down, one could see much more of life. Of course, when there were predators about—zombies, dinosaurs, or other monsters—his pace quickened. Kupalué surprisingly kept up alongside him, moving through the jungle with a strange but swift grace.

After one harrowing escape from a zombie horde, Kupalué made the gestures: *Those who want to eat you are very fast*. Qawasha couldn't tell whether his friend was being matter-of-fact or joking, but he chose to take it as a jest and burst out laughing. Kupalué further surprised Qawasha by opening his little mouth and giving a few coughing, hissing puffs of air. Vegepygmy laughter.

"I'll be damned," Qawasha said to his smiling friend.

As they walked along the massive fallen trunks of ancient trees and climbed down the slick ladders of snarled roots while following a small, clear stream, Kupalué pointed out subtle things. A tiny frog swimming in a rain-filled leaf. An elegant cluster of pale, porcelain-like fungi growing among the damp, black deadwood. He would say something of importance about each one. Everything in the jungle had a purpose, from an ant with green spots that contained a powerful venom, to a plant whose leaves would give off a bright green glow when crushed. The forest was even more magical than Qawasha had ever known.

It was a while before Qawasha returned to Port Nyanzaru, sad to leave behind the friend who couldn't follow him into the hot, moisture-hungry sun that marked the edge of the jungle. But Qawasha needed money for his family. He knew that his parents and grandparents would be waiting for him, wondering where he had gotten to this time. His sister and brother would be waiting, too—waiting to be entertained by his tales of danger and wonder. Thus, he left the forest and his friend, and went back to look for more customers to guide, and to wonder when he would next see Kupalué.

Qawasha spent long days at the Nyanzaru docks, greeting those incoming travelers who, under veneer of bravado or indifference, looked desperately for some person they could trust. The docks could be dangerous, especially if brigands or mercenaries came to port, and Qawasha made certain to avoid the hardened faces of those lost to cruelty, looking for naught else but an excuse to spill blood.

He also spent time in the taverns and markets, assuaging the fears of the unsure and satisfying the curious. Exchanges of this kind with foreigners made him wonder more about the world outside Chult. There were people from the Sword Coast, with whom a friendly joke could be shared or an interest discussed. People who were kind and gentle, inquisitive and filled with humor. Many nights, if he met a particularly interesting person, Qawasha would come home to tell his siblings about the purple man with the talking peacocks, or the woman who claimed to have traveled to other worlds.

Most of these people were looking for guides, and after preparing them as best he could, Qawasha would take them into the jungle. Much of the time, these were warriors, adventurers, and treasure seekers who sought passage through the great unknown. But there was always the odd bard, sage, or druid looking to experience the jungle's wildness in hopes it would inspire heart and mind. Qawasha would take them along well-worn paths and animal trails, staying far away from the places where the undead were fond of clustering. Every expedition had its own story, but through all of them, Qawasha would look, hoping to see Kupalué again.

As the rush of summer dwindled, the flood of ships from the Sword Coast began to decrease. Qawasha met and agreed to guide Samrith Vess, an accomplished researcher and scribe, to the ruins of the fabled city of Mezro. Samrith's looming guardian was a Tethyrian warrior named Zara, her face like stone. At the tea house just outside the Grand Souk, Samrith told Qawasha that she had spent most of her life studying from within the walls of great libraries and other places of learning, reading the scrolls, tomes, and texts on the history of Chult. Until one day, when she suddenly felt that to truly know a place, she had to actually go there.

To claim she was an expert on Chult through only books seemed suddenly preposterous to her, Samrith had said. Books reduce a living

thing to static words, and then attempt to reconstitute it within the reader's imagination. But true knowledge must be experienced. So she took her savings, headed straight to the harbormaster's office in Baldur's Gate, and bought passage on the first merchant ship to Chult. Now she was anxious to finally experience that land, and to see the sunken city of Mezro for herself.

After they bought supplies and managed a good night's sleep, they found themselves crossing the River Tiryki by dawn. From there, Qawasha took them east for half a day, then headed south along a path he had taken many times toward Port Castigliar. A while before sunset, it was time to make camp. Samrith and Zara set up their tents, but found themselves looking in silent admiration as Qawasha crafted a splendid pavilion. Its roof was a mat of blue-green leaves woven across a frame made with stiff, fibrous bark, and tied to the trunks of young trees with lashings of a strong, supple vine.

Qawasha



Soft, pillowy leaves the size of a noble's cloak served as both floor mat and dinner table. Qawasha then built a small campfire, and cooked a meal made from collected jungle plants, dried fungi, and spices he had in his pack. After the meal, he gave his guests a special tea, *chatali*, made from the crushed seeds and leaves of a plant found only in Chult. It was famous locally for having been the favorite drink of Mezroan royalty, when they were in power and the city still stood.

“I’ve only read about this in books.” Samrith’s firelit face showed her grinning like a child in the darkness as she prepared to take her first sip. “It smells so different from what I expected . . . and amazing.”

They swapped stories around the light of the campfire, and Zara even managed to grunt a few rough-and-tumble words about punching people, kicking down doors, and breaking bones. But soon, against the chirps, buzzing, and whistles of the jungle, the talk slowly drifted to Samrith’s fascination with the sunken city of Mezro.

“The books all say that it was built by Ubtao himself,” the scholar said with intensity. “Is it true?”

“Yes,” Qawasha said. “Even though I was not there when it was built, I can say from having stood within the ruins that one can feel the hand of Ubtao there.”

Samrith focused on his every word with growing excitement. She instinctively grabbed Zara’s arm, and the Tethyrian gave her an uncomfortable look that quickly dissolved into amused tolerance.

“Think of it!” Samrith said to Zara. “A city actually built by the hand and mind of a god.”

“It was a great city,” Qawasha continued. “Carved into the thick of the jungle, with high walls, paved streets, and many buildings made of stone.”

“Are those the stones that even the most skilled masons cannot replicate?” Samrith asked. “For only those who can shape the stone through magic can achieve such feats?”

“That is the Great Maze you speak of. The outer city of Mezro was built by humans, but the core was fashioned by Ubtao in that sacred way. It was done like this so that Ubtao’s magic could flow through the maze, to the center of the labyrinth. There, he fashioned a temple with walls of interlocked crystal that rose nine stories to support a great ornate dome wrought from pure gold. It was the center of all things.”

“The Maze of Life,” Samrith said. “I read about a woman who walked that labyrinth, entered the temple, and was taken to another

world. Was this place a portal to another dimension?”

Though he had not traveled with Samrith long, Qawasha could already sense that her heart was sincere and her mind was not a greedy one. Many foreigners came to Chult, hungry for knowledge that they could use to exploit or gain power over others. But he knew that Samrith would use this knowledge to enlighten herself and others, so he continued.

“Many people say strange things about the temple. But it was told to me that the true purpose of the city was to be a place where all the peoples of Chult could come and experience the power of the temple. My teacher told me that those who walked the maze with truth in their hearts would enter a trial within their own being. There would be challenges and ordeals, but the diligent and humble would eventually find the true nature of themselves when they reached the temple. If they entered the temple—and there were some who turned away—they would bathe in the energy of the maze’s glittering heart and emerge transformed.”

Even Zara leaned in closer, her sword momentarily forgotten.

“I’ve read the books,” Samrith said. “I’ve studied the sketches from artists long dead, but never have I heard this. Did this happen to everyone who walked the maze?”

“No. Only the true seekers. The arrogant and greedy would walk to the center, making noise and behaving like drunken fools. They would feel nothing. And should someone evil and cruel enter the maze, craving its power or seeking to destroy the temple, they too would feel nothing.”

“The books talk about the structure of the labyrinth and the fabulous splendor of the temple, but little about this other purpose.” Samrith hesitated. “What I have always wondered, and what the books don’t explain, is how could such a wondrous city just suddenly fall to ruin? Why would Ubtao build this city only to watch it crumble?”

“I am still looking for the answer to that question,” Qawasha replied. “I have thought to myself: Ubtao has given this city to the people as a gift, but can the true value of a gift from a god be comprehended? How does the mind of a god think of time? How does a god think of

death? These are important things to mortals, are they not? So I had to think about this for many months. I followed the scent of this answer like a jaguar on a hunt, so hungry was I to know of the true value of Ubtao's gift."

"Did you find it?" Samrith asked.

Qawasha looked inside himself for a moment, then spoke. "It became clear to me finally that a god doesn't think like a human. We need to make a tremendous effort to understand them. We have to let go of the many heavy weights we are holding onto, in order to climb up high to where the gods reside."

Qawasha laughed. "I imagine Ubtao looked at us as we would look at foolish people. You see the thieves and con artists at the Nyanzaru docks, do you not?" So caught up in their selfish mischief. Imagine you build a beautiful city for them, what would they do to it?"

"They would mess it up pretty good," Zara said.

Qawasha leaned back and pointed to her. "Exactly. It was like that with Mezro."

He looked into the fire then, poking it with a stick. Small sparks rose into the humid air and were soon extinguished. "What does a greedy person know of sharing? Nothing. And the people who inhabited Mezro were no different than those on the docks." They did not walk the maze with the attention that a crane has when it wants to catch a very tricky fish. So careful and intense. But the people, they were mostly lost, or indifferent, or both. Most could not appreciate the gift of the city or the value of the maze. But still, Ubtao allowed the people to do as they will."

"I have read that the city became too corrupted, so Ubtao created guardians for it," Samrith said.

"Those were the barae. They were created from good people in the city, the ones who walked and understood the power of the maze. Seven of them were chosen, and given special understanding and abilities by Ubtao. It was they who guarded the city after Ubtao left. It was they who took it into another world."

“What?” Where she was sipping the royal tea of Mezro, Samrith almost spit it out. “I thought the city fell.”

“No. Many believe it was destroyed, but the city did not fall. The barae guarded it for a long time, and still the spoiled people complained and were angry at Ubtao for not answering and fixing their every problem for them. It was no use. The people could not be responsible for anything. Complain, complain. Until one day, the barae used their power to take Mezro into a paradise that they built, a place where it could exist until the time was right for its return. A time when the people were ready for such a gift.”

“So Ubtao didn’t allow it to be destroyed,” Samrith said, almost to herself. “It still exists.”

“Yes. I have always wanted to see Mezro as it once was.” Qawasha stared off into the darkness of the forest. “Ever since I became aware of how the undead have grown within the jungle like a plague. Ever since I could see how we care less and less for life, and sell our humanity for gold, I have wanted to walk the maze. I have wanted to enter the crystal temple at its center and beg Ubtao for forgiveness. Perhaps if he hears my heart, he will make the barae return Mezro to Chult, so the people can walk the maze once again and stop this spread of unnatural death.”

They talked for long after, until the fire had become a pile of dim coals. Then they took turns watching over each other as their ears listened to the great natural symphony of the jungle at night.

In the morning, they headed to Mezro.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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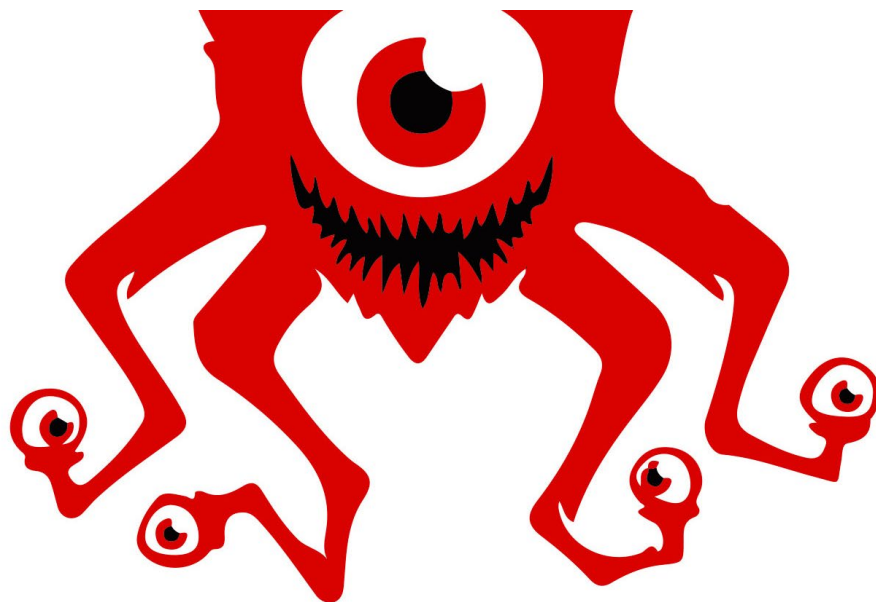
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Click or die! The rise of Idle Champions

Game developer Codename unveils a group of champions that are anything but idle!

Matt Chapman

Eric Jordan and Clive Gorman hold up a huge board so we can see it during our video chat. The high-resolution map was given away by Wizards of the Coast during **Extra Life** last year and they paid a local shop to print it onto foam core. However, the item is yet to find pride of place on Codename's wall, such is the secrecy of working on a D&D title.

"We were going to mount it but we couldn't tell anyone we were working on a D&D game and we thought people would think it was awfully suspicious that we had this massive map of the Sword Coast in our meeting room!" says



Eric Jordan

Jordan.

“It’s funny that I was at the Wizards offices to appear on the Dragon Talk livestream and I thought to myself as I went in, this is the first time going there to talk about D&D that I could publicly say that was what I was going do. All those other times I’d be so excited as a diehard fan but of course I couldn’t post or mention it at all! Because people might be like, ‘Eric, why are you visiting Wizards of the Coast?’ So no Twitter posts or checking in online. Nothing. It was nice to be able to talk about it for a change.”

SPECIAL OFFER

Sign-up for the Idle Champions newsletter now and we’ll send you an email to remind you to download and install Idle Champions when you get back to your PC. Plus we will include a **FREE** code so you can unlock Force Grey Champion, Hitch.



Already on your PC? Sign-up anyway to get your free Hitch code and install Idle Champions on our [Steam Store Page](#) and start playing today.

[SIGN UP](#)

Idle Chatter

Now that the silence has been broken, the most important question for those who've never played a title in this relatively new genre is, what defines an "idle" video game?

"The starting point would be *Cookie Clicker* coming out. There were several proto-idle games that came together and most people point to *Cookie Clicker* as the start point," explains Jordan. "Not everyone understands the genre. They hear the word idle and think it's a game that plays itself in a way that seems really casual. It's casual in the sense that you're not actually going off casting spells, the characters you're using to do your quests are doing all those things. But because you're doing all the management of these characters, you're thinking a lot about how you're crafting them."

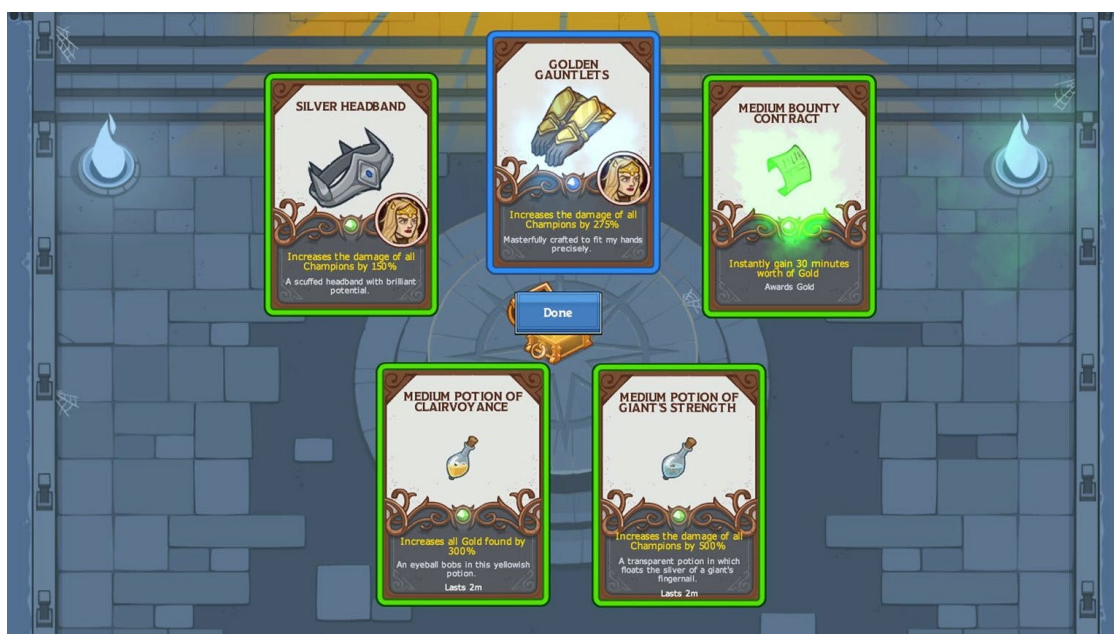
In *Idle Champions*, the heroes complete quests and adventures, gathering gold and gear so they can become more powerful and repeat the cycle.

"A key part of it is that idle games provide this touchpoint experience where you can go in, play for a bit, manage your guys, and leave," Jordan says. "Idle games are designed for shorter interactions. You have this sort of ambient awareness that your guys are off completing a quest for you and you go back and look at how they did."



(Select to view)

What gives *Idle Champions* its depth is one of the more deceptively complex parts of the game. According to Jordan, it's this function that takes a while to grasp. "People think where you're going to place the characters is pretty simple, but where you slot them has a huge impact on the total strength or total DPS for your group. You unlock twelve characters overall and in the base adventure there are only nine slots you can put them in—the number of slots varies with different adventures. You can also build different kinds of formations, such as a tanking group, or one that's more optimized towards collecting gold or killing monsters. So to really master the game, you've got to spend a lot of time figuring out the placement mechanic.



(Select to view)

“It’s relatively easy to pick up but this formation strategy provides a certain elegance to the game. Once you start to get into it, you realize it has all of these different variables and you have to decide which trade off you’re going to do relative to other pieces, in order to get the most effective grouping.

“We’re the only company that’s done the formation strategy element in this particular way. One of the cool things about working in a new genre is that you can come up with something that no-one else has done. Other people may start copying you but we did it before anyone else did it.”

D&D Clicks

Jordan says Codename was excited to be able to combine this new genre with Dungeons & Dragons. “There’s such a depth of history and stories that we can draw on from D&D—in particular, fifth edition and the cadence of the stories they’ve been doing there. We can allow players to experience all of that content as part of their game.”

A big piece of the game’s development was to recreate key settings and capture fan-favorite characters. New heroes and old, from Bruenor to the **Force Grey** characters and everyone in between, have been added to the base set.



(Select to view)

“So you’ve got the stats of these characters, their backgrounds, and dialogue pieces that come up. You go on quests and those all move through the Sword Coast as its set in the Forgotten Realms, so you have those iconic locations.

“It’s important to note that while we’ve translated D&D into the clicker realm, it’s not meant to be a recreation of fifth edition rules,” says Gorman.

“What we’re trying to do is remain very faithful to the spirit of Forgotten Realms and its characters, monsters, and iconic locations within the context of how they’re presented within fifth edition. You don’t roll a d20, you don’t have a literal translation of *magic missile* doing 1d4 damage. The ruleset that we’re using is a different ruleset to fit the genre. You will see *magic missile* and other pieces like that because it’s the spirit of D&D that we’re really trying to be faithful to.”



(Select to view)

Character Building

Idle Champions includes the five characters from Force Grey: Lost City of Omu and as part of their inclusion Codename got to work with some of the celebrities. In particular, Joe Manganiello was very keen to help them translate his dragonborn paladin/barbarian Arkhan.

“It’s been a real privilege to talk to these celebrities about ultimate attacks and convert their ideas of what the character could be into a video game,” says Jordan. “I know that Dylan Sprouse, who was on *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, studied game design at university. So he was thrilled to have a character in a video game and he posted ‘Life goal met!’ on Twitter.”

“It’s fun to get to work with the people who created a character because you get additional details and background pieces,” Gorman adds. “We’re designing all of that gear and equipment. It’s harder to do that if the person who created it isn’t someone you can interact with.”

With Minsc included as a classic character, we’re naturally intrigued to find out how his miniature giant space hamster Boo translates. “He’s part of an ultimate attack,” reveals Jordan. “There’s a specialization tree you can use and he’s one of the ultimates for Minsc. Go for the eyes, of course. I got to chat with Cameron [Tofer] from Beamdog, who had played Minsc originally, so that was pretty

fun. We had a chance to play D&D together and that was a life goal personally met for me.

“We’ve since had several different groups saying, ‘We’d love to be in Idle Champions.’ Characters like Bruenor, Celeste, and Minsc and Boo are iconic Forgotten Realms characters, so it wasn’t a surprise to have them in our game. But it’s a really exciting, fun thing to include the Force Grey characters and then potentially in the future look to where we can add in other D&D streamers!”

Regular Updates

One of the initial attractions for turning D&D into a clicker game was because of its diverse, rich set of stories. Having such a depth of content to draw upon is crucial for the way Codename approaches its titles, which is very good news for regular players.



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“All of our games are free-to-play and we focus very heavily on live servicing them. We tend to do an update every week for a game, including seasonal events, new content areas, new objectives, and features in the game. And we continue to do that for years. We’ve been doing updates for *Crusaders of the Lost Idols* for two years now. *Bush Whacker 2* is over five years old and has a really dedicated following, and we continue to push updates out to that every week.

“That desire to push out updates means we need this unending set of

content. So you'll see there's a brief tour of the Forgotten Realms in the first adventure, which has different pieces within it. Then you'll see the *Tomb of Annihilation* content, and we'll obviously bring in things like *Storm King's Thunder* over time. Each one of those will take you to different parts of the Forgotten Realms." "Every time there's an adventure or some kind of update in the D&D tabletop RPG, we're going to have something related to that," Gorman adds.



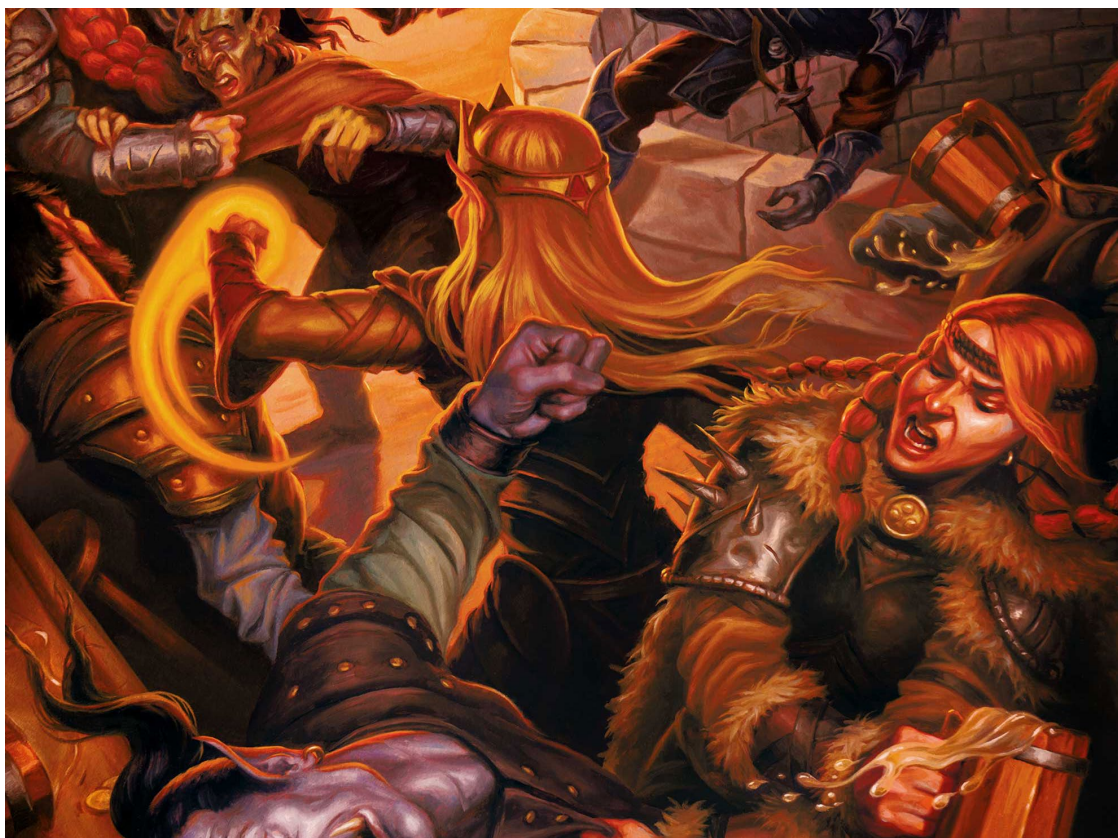
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It sounds to us like Codename will soon be getting plenty of use out of that map, once it's finally been hung on the conference room wall.

"Oh gosh, that map," Jordan says, with a laugh. "We completed a closed alpha for the game and one of the things we had in there as a placeholder was the existing Sword Coast map. But the art style didn't quite work with the style of the rest of the game, so our lead artist and another guy had to redo the whole map! The joy of Chult, which exists outside the Sword Coast, is that we get to do that all again..."

Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms is free-to-play and is available now for Windows PC on Steam.

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Character Spotlight

A look at various characters inspired by our fiction and livestreams!

When we talk about Dungeons & Dragons, it's as heroic fantasy—most of the time because characters are acting morally “heroic” (or at least cooperatively within their own party and towards its goals). However, it also holds that no matter our characters’ natures, they are still the “heroes” of their story. They all have their own backstories, motivations, and goals; and in a well-run game, they all find their own moments to shine (whether as forthright heroes, antiheroes, or the morally grey).

As a further resource, we're pleased to offer a selection of characters to use as models or templates for your own PCs or NPCs in your game. We'll further plan to add more in the coming months. And, our thanks to D&D Beyond for helping in the process!



WAFFLECREW

Dice, Camera, Action! recently returned for its next season of play—this time, within the *Tomb of Annihilation* storyline. Each Tuesday, Chris Perkins DMs for a band of “suboptimal” characters (their word, not ours!) known as the #wafflecrew. Why waffles? Perhaps that’s what they were searching for when they first banded together. Or perhaps Waffles is what they named their pet baby owlbear. Either way, watch Tuesdays 4-6PM PT on [twitch.tv/dnd](https://www.twitch.tv/dnd)!

As part of the crew, Diath Woodrow the rogue has no interest in breaking into homes, cutting purses in the streets or taking from other citizens struggling to get by. For him, uncovering long-forgotten artifacts is far more valuable than any amount of coin.

[Download Diath](#)

As for Paultin Seppa the bard, his main concern usually involves his next flagon of ale!

[Download Paultin](#)

FORCE GREY: LOST CITY OF OMU



Season 2 finds our intrepid adventurers—Joe Manganiello (Arkhan), Deborah Ann Woll (Jamilah), Brian Posehn (Calliope), Utkarsh Ambudkar (Hitch), and Dylan Sprouse (Tyril)—traveling deep into the jungles of Chult. And of course Matt Mercer returns to lend his voice as Dungeon Master. Airs Mondays 5-6PM PT on [twitch.tv/dnd](https://www.twitch.tv/dnd).

Like Diath, Hitch plays the rogue of the group. With his quick wit and roguish charm, Hitch plans to somehow land on his feet, on a pile of gold, with a treasure map in each hand... but until then he needs all the friends he can get.

[Download Hitch](#)

GIBBET

From *Dragon+* Issue 9, we ran a fiction piece entitled ” **A Man and His Dog.**” The boy in question went by the moniker “Gibbet” after being forced to hide in one such cage as his village was razed. Rescued by the Emerald Enclave, he joined their ranks as a ranger, later finding a similarly orphaned companion—Blencan the blink dog.

There was an alternate ending written for the story—somewhat darker, but still optimistic, depending on your reading. Blencan was originally meant to sacrifice himself during the final battle against Bloody-beard, the fire giant that razed both their homes; from the

ashes of that battle, Gibbet would have recovered—and raised—a hell hound whelp as his new companion.

The following character sheet follows the printed version. But in some parallel universe, there's a slightly darker version of a ranger now accompanied by a more hellish companion.

[Download Gibbet](#)

Next issue, look for further character sheets from the Wafflecrew (Strix), Force Grey (Arkhan, Jamilah), and other livestreams!

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Behind the Screen: Driving A stake In it

How using the lessons of pop culture and literature to create stakes can enhance character and the overall roleplaying experience.

Ethan Gilsdorf

Perhaps this problem sounds familiar. You’ve lived with your character—your dwarf barbarian Bhalrak, or tiefling monk Chodrun, or halfling sorcerer Flambard—for countless adventures. But the thrill is gone. You’re disengaged, and despite all the battles and glory and gold, the *raison d’être* for your character feels hollow. A roleplaying malaise has crept into your game night. The DM is frustrated too. Players don’t seem to care about what happens to them, or appreciate the hours spent painstakingly building the world.

The problem could be “stakes”.
No, not the rib-eye or T-bone kind
you throw on the grill (although a

medium-rare slab of meat might keep your gaming group from grumbling). We mean stakes, as in, “What’s at stake for your character?” The notion of stakes can be the ingredient often forgotten in this otherwise rich and immersive communal storytelling experience.

Understanding stakes

Intuitively, we all know what stakes are. Think of your average action or adventure movie: “Help [insert name of hero here]: The fate of the world is at stake!” Just about any form of narrative that is driven by character and story has stakes, and storytellers rely on them to make readers and viewers care about the plight of those involved and the outcome of plots. If we’re invested in the stakes, we’ll keep turning the pages of a thriller until 3am, or watch the next seventeen episodes of whatever TV show has hooked us. We can borrow the same techniques from movies, series, novels, and comic books to create stakes in our binge-worthy sessions of dice-rolling and roleplaying.

In D&D, stakes mean something is at risk, and there’s consequences. What is the reason you (both your character *and* the person doing the role-playing) are invested in your journey? What does Bhalrak stand to lose if he doesn’t accomplish a task? What does Chodrun gain if she does? Stakes can be personal and internal, or worldly and external. But when stakes have more meaning to the character, they’ll have more of an impact on the player.

Let’s say your halfling sorcerer Flambard and his adventuring party are facing an evil lich. It’s the final epic battle after a long campaign. If the lich wins, the



Tiefling (select to view)

surrounding land falls under a spell for 100 years. As a good person, Flambard has a significant stake in stopping that from happening. But what if, during the battle, the lich nails Bhalrak and Chodrun with its *paralyzing touch*? Now the stakes are raised.



Lich (select to view)

Or, what if the lich threatens to destroy a sacred fountain from whence flows the source of Flambard's magic? What if a spell Flambard wants to use in battle has failed the other 27 times he's tried to cast it? What if the lich taunts Flambard about his big nose (something our hero has been particularly sensitive about since he was a kid)? With the introduction of stakes like these, things become more complicated, tenser, and there's more reason—more at stake—for the battle to go your way. Instant engagement and fun around the gaming table.

Stakes are not plot or conflict

While D&D requires goals, conflict, and plot, these things are not the same as stakes. They're related, but distinct. Examples from pop culture can help explain what we mean.

Take the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The main goal for Indiana Jones is to find the Ark of the Covenant, and outsmart the Nazis. His main conflict is the Nazis, who want to harness the item's power to win the war. "Lives in jeopardy" is the most obvious external stakes. Even if he doesn't say it, you can imagine Indy thinking, "The entire outcome of World War II is in my hands!" To these geopolitical stakes, personal stakes are added when Indy's adventuring partner/lover Marion Ravenwood is captured.

Then come stakes concerning Indy's fear of snakes. In one pivotal scene, Indy and Marion are imprisoned in the Well of the Souls, a chamber full of venomous vipers. It's funny, but what's really at risk

for Indy? Not only his and Marion's possible death by poisoning, but confronting his shame and ideas about bravery. "Tough guys aren't afraid of snakes! But if I can't overcome my fear, we'll both die." (Let's not mention what's at stake in Indy overcoming his commitment issues).

Remember: goals are what your character wants to do, and conflict is the series of escalating obstacles she faces. Stakes are the consequences of her being successful, or not being successful, in achieving them. The conflict is anything that puts the stakes at risk.

High Stakes

Here's another way to think about it. While goals and conflict address the questions, "What do we want to do" and "What's stopping us?", stakes help you answer the questions, "Why does this matter?" and "Why should I care?"

In the recent *Wonder Woman* reboot movie, a lot matters. Her idyllic island home of Themyscira is put at risk when she ventures out into the modern world to help defeat the German army. She's immortal, but still theoretically risks losing her life. Also at stake are her noble ideals: she's smart and tough, but also naive and almost fatally empathetic. Will these ideals be corrupted the more time she spends among the messiness and suffering of the war, and its flawed humans? Will she grow jaded?



Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc (select to view)

If you take a look at the Netflix TV series *Stranger Things*, you'll see plenty of interlocking stakes at play. If Mike, Dustin and Lucas don't solve the mystery of what happened to their friend Will, who's been abducted by the Demogorgon, they'll never see him again. Also at risk, potentially, is the fate of the entire town if the monster can't be defeated.

When the mysterious Eleven appears, something more subtle is at stake. These pre-adolescent boys don't know the world of girls; they now risk losing their innocence and childhood. The kids are also social outcasts. They're bullied. They're not supposed to be heroes. With every humiliating jeer, their dignity and self-esteem is at risk. Which is why, when they do outsmart the adults and the bullies, their triumph feels all the more thrilling.

Or take Frodo Baggins from *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo is motivated to do the right thing, and destroy the One Ring. As it corrupts him, what's at stake is not only the fate of the Fellowship, but his beloved homeland of the Shire, and all of Middle-earth. He also stands to lose his sanity. But he's motivated to keep going towards Mordor, so he won't lose what he holds most dear.

Writers constantly shift and "up" the stakes to complicate character

situations and keep readers on the hook. Harry Potter is a good example. His initial stakes are simply self-preservation: to survive his maltreatment by his relatives, who lock him away under the stairs. These gradually escalate over the course of the story at Hogwarts and beyond. Harry risks not only his life, but also the lives of others in his battle to defeat Voldemort.

Stakes and motivation

Asking yourself, “What motivates my character?” can help identify stakes. In *Book in a Month: The Fool-proof System for Writing a Novel in 30 Days*, author Victoria Lynn Schmidt offers advice for novelists that applies perfectly to D&D. When examining what’s motivating your do-gooding protagonist, Schmidt suggests looking beyond the standard answer:

Don’t just give a generic reply like, “The hero wants to save the village from the bad guys and avenge his friend.” Go deeper than that. Ask yourself, “Why does he want this?” Your answer should relate to your character’s core traits, flaws, and goals. For instance, “The hero needs to feel needed. He needs to save the village to prove his self-worth, and he wants to feel the satisfaction and power of avenging his friend’s death.”

If “your character just wants to have the satisfaction of doing the right thing,” Schmidt says, keep drilling down to the underlying causes. Your tiefling paladin might do the right thing because she’s lawful good, and because she likes to see order restored to the universe. But what if her motivation stems from wanting to redeem herself for a past mistake, like accidentally killing an infant orc? That’s even more compelling.

Indeed, your character’s class, archetype, origin, alignment, appearance, and personal characteristics—personality traits, ideals, bonds, and flaws—can all drive the stakes. Backstory details such as, “I would die to recover an ancient relic of my faith that was lost long ago,” and quirks such as “I judge others harshly, and myself even more severely,” both examples from the *Player’s Handbook*, (see page 127) are clues to what makes your character tick. Even a high or low ability score can help you see what’s at stake when you roleplay. If your character has super-low Charisma, it raises the stakes when

she tries to charm a local warlord with her cunning.

Adding stakes

In a good D&D campaign, DMs want their players to become engaged in their stories and worlds. And players want to be engaged in their characters' struggles and triumphs. We've come up with a few easy ways to "up" the stakes for your game...

- Give players not only "end of the world" quests, but ones that affect them personally. For example, a wizard character that wants to cast a certain spell can be told she needs to prove her worth by collecting certain ingredients, but this might take several playing sessions to complete. Side quests and individual goals help create individual stakes and investment in the plot.
- Let players develop character backstories and ask them specifically to do some "soul-searching" about the stakes. What drives your character? What are his biggest dreams? What does she want most? Fear most? Worry about losing? Make these questions and their answers play out as stakes in an upcoming adventure.
- Let players invent an item in their possession that has special meaning or powers, or some puzzle or mystery from their past they need to solve. For example, one player could decide that he needs to recover a magical amulet that once belonged to his character's mother.
- Encourage players to roleplay their character around one or two defining personality traits, the quirkiest, the better: spiteful, vindictive, dramatic, overly trusting, generous, mischievous, foolhardy. By giving them quirks, foibles and Achilles heels, and playing to these weaknesses at times, they'll be more fun to play in game.

The whole point of stakes is to increase your engagement with the story, and become more immersed in what happens to the characters. When there's a reason for a character to care about the outcome, a player will have more ownership of the storyline. So don't shy away from making things tough on your characters. They'll rise to the occasion, and sometimes fail, just like Wonder Woman or Indiana Jones. The end result is a fantasy that will feel all the more real.



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Dragon Classics

From the Dragon archives!

Each issue, we pore over the various content that's graced the pages of *Dragon Magazine* through the years. And while the focus of the magazine has of course been on Dungeons & Dragons, it has also often stretched beyond the rules and supplemental content for running the game; **as shown last issue**, *Dragon* presented its own fully encapsulated games as well (of which, we showcased *Clay-o-Rama* and *Dino Wars*).



THE TUG OF THE MACHINE

by Allen Evans

Had they not been running so fast, at least one of them would not have died so soon. As it was, the length of the hall took them by surprise as they rounded the corner and they stopped short — seized by indecision.

The first one died then, the quarrel catching him high in the neck and sending him down before he had drawn two rasping breaths. The death rattle of their comrades seemed to serve as a catalyst for the others. They spotted him some thirty yards down the hall, winding his crossbow furiously in order to make a second shot. With a rushing of feet through dank air the two survivors charged, drawn weapons displaying shivers of light as the guttering torches on the walls were reflected from the blades.

In futility he tossed aside his useless bow and drew his weapon to meet their rush.

At the last second two quick steps moved him to one side and forward, allowing him to engage the leader, who was preceding his stocky partner. The air hissed as steel met steel and then reverberated with a scream as steel met man and the second of the trio joined his companion on the floor. The upward slicing stroke which had ended his first attacker's life now went to work on his second, bending over to come to a full crashing stop against the other man's guard.

Almost a dance, the combat circled and spun, twisting this way and that as the men struck and parried and then counterstruck. Slashing, almost wild blows were aimed at his head, only to be deflected or ducked. The stocky man made a lunge he would have thought impossible, save for the fact that it was deflected just enough by his own blade to slice through the outer folds of his tunic rather than through the skin for which it had been intended. But the effort proved to be his foe's final one as his own circling blade swung down to almost decapitate him.

He stood for a few moments breathing deeply to catch his lost breath and to feel the throb of the last blow slowly die away. They had left the initial meeting point of the combat further up the corridor and with slow and not altogether steady footsteps, he went padding down the hall to retrieve his crossbow and quiver.

He had just put his hand around the stock of the bow when the room blinked out.

When he woke he was staring into the hulk of the Machine.

Very slowly, he sat up, and began removing the series of wires attached to his scalp. The breaking of contact between his scalp and the tiny brain-pads on the ends of the wires sent a pleasant pain coursing down his spine which he, in a way, enjoyed feeling. There was no one in the apartment to notice, but the occasional glance he favored at the Machine was filled with a mixture of pleasure and pride. It was the most expensive present he had ever allowed himself to buy, for him, or anyone else. *Nine thousand credits*. For five years he had dreamed and scraped and sacrificed to get the money.

"Time, please," he said, rising from the chair kneading his head with his fingers.

The wall responded almost immediately with: "Five o'clock and twenty-five seconds, sir."

Almost twenty minutes late for his meeting with Michelle! But he caught himself mid-thought and debated going at all. The meeting was almost certainly a facade for a surprise birthday party. If it was one thing he couldn't stand, it was parties. Michelle was always doing that kind of thing and forever irritating him. He struggled with the thought of plugging another scenario into the Machine and gaming for another half hour, but then rejected it: picturing Michelle's crushed expression on the phone was too much.

He quickly got dressed, turned off the Machine and lights and left, locking the door behind him.

And as he slowly walked down the hall, he could almost hear the Machine calling after him.

end

Tug of the Machine/Catacomb (select to view)

For fans of the magazine, it goes without saying that *Dragon* also served as a welcome home for short fiction; and, like it's general direction, while this fiction often focused on D&D's stories and settings, it also took opportunities to stray outside of these boundaries and consider speculative fiction and its authors more broadly.

Through the years, many authors have graced its pages, both those intimately involved with D&D and beyond—Fritz Leiber, Gardner Fox, Tracy Hickman, Ben Bova, Elaine Cunningham, Ed

Greenwood, Jeff Grubb, R.A. Salvatore, Margaret Weiss, Harry Turtledove, Michael A. Stackpole, Dave Gross—and of course, Gary Gygax himself!

For our storytelling issue, it only seemed fitting to present a selection of tales that have appeared in the magazine. Two takes, across two genres:



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RIGHTFALL IN THE MOUNTAINS
was like nightfall in the city for Dennim. Shadows — home — grew and prospered; darkness, which blinded others, keened his eyes and ears as nothing else could. The sounds were different, to be sure, but hearing a centurion sneak from behind was almost the same as hearing a cat poised to attack. And the awesome mountains of Kenna held something that had eluded Dennim for all of his life in the city: everlasting treasure.

Dennim was a hobgoblin and a thief, and both identities had caused him discomfort many times. In the villages at the foot of Kenna's mountains, a child of mountain goblin and lowland human was neither as unusual nor as humiliated as in the larger city. But justice against an apprehended thief in Montgate and other small villages was swift and brutal, far worse than the labors and imprisonment issued in Kenna City. There was a best and worst in both places, just as there was Whitefire and Darkfire. The best in Kenna City were those shadowy streets and questionable taverns, where a half-man might be welcome and a thief could earn a living. The best in Montgate and the villages were these nearby mountains and the secrets that they hid.

The jagged opening in the mountain face was exactly where the map Dennim had memorized had indicated it would be. It was a tall, man-sized, but cleverly concealed entrance. From his pack, Dennim pulled out some of the corn ears which he had stolen in Montgate for luck. He arranged these ears in a tottering pile at the cave entrance. On top of the pile of corn, he balanced rocks and a few coins. Anyone or thing following him would topple the standing ears, and Dennim's sensitive hearing would pick up the noise. This done, he crept inside.

The map, which Dennim had stolen in Kenna City, had recorded this place as a monastery, but it was like no monastery that he had ever seen. The jagged entrance widened into a full room, barely lit by the moon outside. Once inside, Dennim moved quickly to the right-hand wall, which was clammy and rough. Running water had probably carved out the cave, as it did not appear to be the work of man or tool. There were no torches, no offering fires. While there were dark forms scattered about this near part of the room, none of them resembled the shape of the traditional Whitefire vault that Dennim was here to loot.

He pulled an ear of corn from his pack and tossed it toward the dark center of the room. It landed with a quiet splash, which echoed to his goblin's ears but quickly ended. All was quiet again. He tossed another ear as far as he could into the darkness. It didn't land, or it landed on something soft, or it landed beyond his hearing range.

"Or," he whispered, "just to be paranoid, something caught it."

Dennim smiled and slid his dagger out of its scabbard. With a flick of his wrist he flipped the dagger

Dennim and the Golem

by Robert S. Babcock

Illustrations by Stephan Perreine

Dennim and the Golem (select to view)

First, we have *Tug of the Machine* (from Allen Evans, *Dragon* #25/May '79), a short piece that works quite nicely as a prelude to *Catacomb* (Henry Melton's piece from *Dragon* #97/May '85). Both offer a take on how digital gaming might impact the lives of future games.

Then, a pair of stories sharing a common theme—thieves vs. wizards! From *Dragon* #99/July '85, we present Robert Babcock's *Dennim and the Golem*; followed by *Dragon* #160/August '90, and Dean Edmonds' *Thief on a String*.

[Download Tug of the Machine/Catacomb](#)

[Download Dennim and the Golem](#)

Download Thief on a String



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THE TUG OF THE MACHINE

BY ALLEN EVANS

HAD THEY NOT BEEN RUNNING SO FAST, AT least one of them would not have died so soon. As it was, the length of the hall took them by surprise as they rounded the corner and they stopped short—seized by indecision.

The first one died then, the quarrel catching him high in the neck and sending him down before he had drawn two rasping breaths. The death rattle of their comrade seemed to serve as a catalyst for the others. They spotted him some thirty yards down the hall, winding his crossbow furiously in order to make a second shot. With a rushing of feet through dank air, the two survivors charged, drawn weapons displaying shivers of light as the guttering torches on the walls were reflected from the blades.

In futility, he tossed aside his useless crossbow and drew his weapon to meet their rush.

At the last second, two quick steps moved him to one side and forward, allowing him to engage the leader, who was preceding his stocky partner. The air hissed as steel met steel, and then reverberated with a scream as steel met body and the second of the trio joined his companion on the floor. The upward-slicing stroke which had ended his first attacker's life now went to work on his second, bending over to come to a full crashing stop against the other warrior's guard.

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And as he slowly walked down the hall, he could almost hear the Machine calling after him. ■





CATACOMB

BY HENRY MELTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LARRY DAY



LUNAE, ASSASSIN FOR THE Witch Queen of the Hinterlands, paused in silence before the large stone door. <LISTEN, SMELL> There was no sound beyond the latched opening, but she had learned to distrust silence in this place. The walls were cubits thick. The door, though balanced to open with a light shove, was itself more than a foot thick, and when closed, it was sealed nearly airtight. Sound never traveled far in this twisty, dusty place, but the smells that the people and the beasts left behind had proved especially trustworthy to her.

She moved her torch to her left hand and leaned closer to the edge of the door, where she might catch a whiff of the scents within. There was, as always, a faint human scent and the musty tang of some beast that must frequent this set of corridors. She hoped never to meet that one in the flesh. There was something . . . compelling about that scent. She feared it. But now, there seemed to creep from behind the door a new scent—the smell of spice!

If there was any chance of a person behind the door, she had better be ready for a fight. The catacombs were more wild and dangerous than any other place she had been. There was gold here, and of course, there was greed. *Strike first!* had proved themselves sure words of wisdom in the seemingly endless time she had spent in these dark, dusty halls. Lunae took stock of herself. She had eaten hours ago, and she was in fighting trim. The tools of her trade were ready to her fingers. It was a momentary temptation to pass by this door, but she had no idea if this corridor would provide another exit soon enough to avoid the creature with the musty scent. There was no reason to delay. Her torch was more than half gone. Going back was out of the question.

<OPEN THE DOOR> The latch worked smoothly, but the hinges did not. The door moved unevenly with the popping grind of a stone pivot.

<LOOK> Glowstone lit the roomy chamber with its cool blue light. <PUT OUT TORCH> There were signs of travelers. A torn leather sack lay on a large, flat boulder next to a trickling spring. The rivulet barely parted the dust on the floor before vanishing into a fault-line crack. That dust was well stirred by prints of people and beasts. Seeing hoofprints amazed her. *Lead a pack animal down into the catacombs? The scents alone in this place would spook it.*

Two other stone doors faced her. This was a crossroad, if that term could be used in these underground passages. She quickly moved to check them. <LISTEN AT DOORWAYS> There was never too much caution in this place.

There were no sounds, and the smells of this oft-used stopping place masked anything that might be beyond them. A set of conveniently placed boulders were at hand, so she blocked all three entrances.

"Thank you." It was a man's voice.

<PIVOT LOW, PLACE THROWING KNIFE IN LEFT HAND, LOOK>

She spun into a crouch, ready to throw her knife as soon as she spotted a target. Though it wasn't terribly bright, the glowstone light shone evenly enough to wash out shadows. A person could hide in two or three places among the jumble of boulders where the spring was sourced. Lunae was painfully aware that she was without the smallest boulder to protect her from any thrown weapon. She shifted her stance to give her better mobility. *Stupid! I've spent too much time getting this far into the catacombs to be killed by some clever thief.* There was nowhere to run. The doors were tightly wedged by the boulders she'd so carefully moved into place!

"Nervous one, aren't you? You could at least say 'hello.' "

She had his hiding place located now. There was a crack between the stones, through which he watched her. He was shielded from her knife, but if she could reach the brass vial of contact poison in her pack . . . <STAND UP SLOWLY, SAY: "YOU STARTLED ME. I EXPECTED TO BE ATTACKED." TAKE A STEP TOWARD MY PACK>

He had not attacked, even though he had an obvious tactical advantage. Perhaps she could reach—

He spoke. "I would appreciate it if you stayed right where you are!" She froze, her mind in high gear. He could have a nocked arrow aimed her way. If so, the aim would be hampered by the very rocks that protected him; no other weapon would have a better chance. He was either stupid or bluffing.

<DIVE INTO A ROLL, GRAB MY PACK, USE MY PACK AS A SHIELD, GET THE BOTTLE OF POISON> She felt the embossed bottle in her pack just as the stinging bite of a dart found her arm. Lunae fought for consciousness as a wave of buzzing darkness rushed over her.

YOU HAVE BEEN RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS BY A POISONED DART. YOU ARE LOGGED OFF CATACOMB FOR 00:30 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:
\$0.78 FOR TODAY
\$12.40 FOR THE GAME
\$ 7.50 TREASURE BONUS
{RESERVED}

JUDITH STARED MOROSELY AT HER SCREEN. Fat chance her treasure would be there when she checked back. It was even odds that Mr. Hide-and-Seek would kill her and she'd have to create another character. She bunched her right hand into a fist and hit the desktop. A stack of papers were knocked off the desk and landed on the floor with a fluid plop.

"Judith?" Her father's voice called from his office room down the hall. "Is anything wrong?"

Her finger stabbed the PAGE CLEAR key, and she called back, "No, Daddy. I just transposed a field. No problem." Her voice shook a little and her hand hurt. She didn't need to lose her temper. Catacomb was proving to be a harder way to make money than she had hoped.

Her gaze rested guiltily on the scattered pile of handwritten invoices that she needed to key into a file as her task for the day. Best get to it. Father wasn't one to let the kids slide on their chores. Even though she was seventeen, he could make her feel like her baby brother Georgie when he was caught with forbidden cookie crumbs all over his face. Maybe he wouldn't mind her Catacomb adventures, but play before work was against the house rules.

She picked up the first paper and invoked the home database. Get the file built, then check on Lunae again.

YOU ARE UNCONSCIOUS FROM THE EFFECTS OF
A POISONED DART. LOGON TO CATABOMB IS NOT
ALLOWED FOR 00:14 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:
\$ 0.78 FOR TODAY
\$ 12.40 FOR THE GAME
\$ 0.00 TREASURE BONUS

Thief! Well, at least he'd left her alive.

She cleared the screen and plopped down on her bed. Her flute case, half buried among books and cosmetics on her dressing table, was a black reminder of her problems. It was not going as she had planned. The ruby stolen from Lunae wasn't worth much in real money, but she'd counted on it to cover part of her time charges for playing the game until she could find more treasure. The three hundred dollars was due in two weeks. To be twelve dollars in the hole was not only depressing, it was embarrassing. She shouldn't have told her friend Diana about her plan.

With a whoop, her younger brother Barry skidded into her room and was followed by Jay, his friend from the house down the hill. A pair of suction-cup darts crossed in the air, one of them bouncing off the mirror of her dressing table.

"Barry, get out of my room this instant! You're messing up everything." She picked up the expended plastic dart and tossed it out the doorway.

"Hey! That's my dart!"

"Then go get it, brat!"

From down the hall, her father's voice silenced them both. "You kids be quiet. It's work time. Barry, do you want some file maintenance? Judith, are your invoices done?"

They both knew silence was the safest course. Barry gave her a sneer as his brotherly token of disrespect, then waved Jay out with him. If there had been a silent way of murdering her brother . . .

LUNAE CAME TO CONSCIOUSNESS WITH THE feel of her pack under her head as a pillow. Her thief had left her stretched out comfortably, concealed behind the rocks that had protected him. <TAKE INVENTORY> A quick survey of her pack and her person revealed only the ruby missing. Even her weapons were still in their places. She was puzzled. Most thieves would have left her dead and sold her provisions back to the Wizard of the Gate.

<SMELL, LISTEN> The smell of the thief was quite strong in the coffin-sized hidey-hole. He'd obviously spent considerable time waiting there for victims. She crawled from behind the rocks carefully. No one was in sight. A glance told her that the thief had cleared all three doorways and had obscured any footprints in the dust.

<STATE HOW I AM> The effects of the poison lingered in her system. She felt more tired than she ought to have been, and quick motion was an invitation to dizziness. But it should wear off quickly. Her only question now was whether she should follow her thief in order to turn the tables on him and recover her ruby, or search out another treasure before her supplies ran out and she had to make for the Wizard's Gate.

Before she could shoulder her pack, the decision was taken away from her. A sudden wave of acid stench hit her. Out of nothingness stepped trouble. The dim light of glowstone was adequate, this time, to tell her quite enough: a Tor beast!

Adventurers into the catacombs perforce did business with the Wizard of the Gate to purchase their supplies, but more than gold pieces and bronze weapons were exchanged at the market. Rumor and outright lies about the hazards and treasure in the catacombs were bought and sold as well. And nothing said about the teleporting half-humanoid/half-beasts that searched the chambers was comforting. Some said Tor beasts were adventurers from another plane, given access by some other Wizard of the Gate—perhaps one of their own number. They were not animals. They walked upright and sometimes were known to use magic. They didn't use swords because they didn't need to.

<PLACE THROWING KNIFE IN THE LEFT HAND, PLACE SHORT SWORD IN THE RIGHT HAND> She didn't attack. Armored like a beetle, with hands like the paws of a tiger, the Tor beast topped her five-foot height by six inches and outweighed her by at least two hundred pounds. The pelt—if it was a pelt—formed a half-dozen rings about its torso, and a ridge of bluish-black shag from one claw, across the shoulders, to the other. The head was piggish, but the eyes betrayed an intelligent malevolence. Its growl as it spotted her was a deep bass that seemed to shake her insides. Nothing in the rumors she had heard told of how to kill one.

The Tor beast seemed to have no such worry. It turned and stalked toward her with the body-twisting gait of a bear. She threw her knife directly toward where its navel would have been, had the thing been born. The

knife stuck for an instant, before the beast shook it loose. The wound only made it angrier.

Lunae was moving up on the rocks before her knife had left her fingers. The beast was powerful, but she was much lighter on her feet. She picked up her pack by the straps and slung it at the thing's head.

Maybe the Tor beast walked slowly, but there was nothing sluggish about the way it snatched the pack out of the air and ripped it wide open with its claws. Her goods spilled out, and she felt sick as the beast, with an angry growl, ground her food supply and spare torches to mush and toothpicks.

Then the monster crouched and jumped ten feet in one motion, landing on the boulders just below where Lunae stood. She scrambled higher, using her sword to keep him at a distance. It didn't work. Its arm shot out, a blur. Then—pain; she barely held onto the sword as the beast batted it aside. With the stench of the creature wafting over her and the sick feeling that her sword was bent, she grabbed the hilt with both hands and forced all her strength into a sideways stroke. Her sword twisted and slid out of her grip as the warped blade slapped rather than cut the beast.

The thing roared. She could almost feel the bone-shattering slap she knew the monster could give her. But the slap never came. The moment of grace wasn't wasted. As well as she could with the ruined sword in her grasp, she rolled over the top of the mound, down into the coffin-sized pit where she had regained consciousness.

The beast roared again. She knew the monster would be down on her the instant it navigated the rocks. The blade—now that she had a second to actually look at it—was in bad shape. Both bent and twisted, it would never take the force of an attack, even if the beast could be tricked into falling on it. It would bend like a hairpin. She gambled precious seconds in hopes of straightening the sword. She wedged the blade halfway into a crack in the rock and shoved all of her slight weight against it. When the blade was far short of perfection, but perhaps usable, she pulled the sword loose and held it ready.

For a hurried breath or two, she waited. There was silence in the chamber. Then the Tor beast growled, but it sounded . . . weaker. Gambling again: <LOOK THROUGH THE CRACKS> The limited view gave a puzzling sight. The thing was staggering, struggling to keep its balance.

Enlightenment hit. The poison! She looked to the chamber floor, where the fragments of her belongings were scattered. Among the debris was a bit of metal that might have been the brass bottle smashed flat by a powerful foot.

What would the poison do to it? A human would be dead the instant a drop touched skin. Could the Tor beast shake off the effects? The creature was very powerful. Perhaps it had protective magic. If it recovered, she didn't want to be around.

But there was always treasure. Magical beasts often collected treasure themselves. If her Tor beast died, she wanted anything of value it might have. She hefted the sword in her hand. Perhaps she could assist the poison a bit.

Shortly, the monster stumbled and fell. She was up and over her rocky barricade in an instant. The beast was on its back, still struggling against the powerful convulsions the poison was creating in its muscles. Fighting against its own mutinous body, the Tor beast desperately grabbed at a black leather armband that circled its left arm just above the elbow. The creature's life or death fueled its determination. If it could work the band's secrets, it might yet survive.

That's it! The Tor beast's magic is in that armband! Lunae watched its struggles for an instant more, then danced in close for an opportunity to slash at the arm with her sword. It cut the monster's flesh, but not deeply. She did it again. And again. Finally, arm and body were separated. She kicked the still-twitching limb out of the beast's reach and waited for the monster to die. Blood, looking black in the blue light of the chamber, squirted forcefully from severed arteries. Quickly, it stopped.

The trained assassin normally had no qualms examining a dead body, but something alien in it chilled her as she stepped near. The stench, now so much stronger in the spilled blood, made it difficult to breathe. The feel of the body was like an upholstered leather chair that remained warm from the life of the person who had sat there. It seemed surprisingly soft. Lunae expected hard, armor-like plate.

She searched the corpse for any natural or artificial pouches, pockets, or bags—anywhere the beast might have stored something of value. Within a minute, she admitted defeat. *Logical. Any being that can teleport won't keep too many possessions on its body, since it can go get them in an instant.*

As she felt the body, it grew softer by the moment. When she noticed this curious fact, she quit instantly and backed away.

Starting at the beast's chest, the body quivered slightly. Then it began to liquefy. In the dim light, her eyes could just make out thousands of sprouts, much like the fur on moldy bread. Tendrils of terribly rapid decay covered the body in half a minute. Slime from the rotting flesh dripped to the floor and formed a thickening flow to join the trickle of the spring.

In disgust, she turned from the sight to spot the beast's arm. It was whole. There seemed to be no sign of the decay that had already turned the body into an unrecognizable mound. Gingerly, she approached it. A cautious touch—first with the point of the sword, then with her hand—gave the impression of teak wood covered with leather. There was no softness. Quickly, before the decay could start, she slipped the armband off the dead limb.

The band was made of flexible leather with a ridge of worked metal along both edges. *It looks like silver, maybe. Almost the right size for a belt. It will sell. Magic always sells.* She eyed the claws. The arm, separated from the body, seemed to be spared the extremely fast decay. *That might sell too, but I want no part of it!*

The armband slipped loosely over her shoulder like a coil of rope. As of the moment, it, her sword, and the pair of knives she had hidden in her clothes were her only possessions. What was not smashed was probably contaminated with the spilled poison. It would not be

safe to touch for another day. With no supplies, no food, and no torches for light, she might be dead by then.

The Wizard's Gate was too distant for her to travel to without food, even if she could make her way in total darkness. There was really only one thing she could do: pursue her thief. Since he had spared her life, perhaps she could persuade him to give her provisions in exchange for some service. If not, perhaps she could steal from him what she needed to survive. Following him seemed to be worth the effort.

Yet the darkness still posed a problem. If only the glowstones could be used for lighting! But they were far too dim. Unless there existed a chamber lined entirely with glowstones like this one, the journey would have to be done in the dark.

She walked to each doorway and carefully sniffed the air. The stench of the beast covered everything, but her sensitive nose could still detect other scents.

"Judith! Supper!" Barry called from the base of the stairs up to her opened door.

Oh no! I must chase him before the scent gets cold.

"Just a minute! I've got to log off."

This was a horrible time to stop and search for a shelter. She grabbed a fist-sized piece of glowstone. Its light would be useless more than a few inches away, but it was the only light she had. With more desperation than confidence, she glided as

swiftly as she dared down the length of the corridor. With her sword sheathed, she let the fingertips of her left hand feel for openings in the wall. She imagined she was passing a dozen perfect shelters on the right-hand wall. Only two things were clear in the darkness: her time was running out, and the thief's scent was tantalizingly present.

If she had only gone back, retraced her path toward the Wizard's Gate, she would have known exactly where to shelter. She imagined the crypt carved in the wall, where she had spent the night before her disastrous encounter with the thief. That would be ideal.

"Judith! It's getting cold." It was her father's voice this time.

"Coming!" If I log off now, Lunae will seek shelter and attempt to fight off attackers like a dim-witted robot programmed and operated by the computer. Her only real chance for survival is for her to find shelter under her own power.

At that instant, her hand felt a carved doorsill in the rock. Not knowing nor caring what creature might be waiting within, she pushed aside the stone doorway. Groping about the room, Lunae found a foot-long stone slab that could be used as a deadbolt in order to seal the chamber from almost any terror that

roamed the corridors. She dropped her glowstone and secured the door.

There was barely enough room to lie down in the closet-sized, cold rock crypt, but she didn't care.

JUDITH RAPIDLY KEYED THE LOGOFF AND dashed out of her room, not waiting to view the message on the screen.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:
\$ 1.58 FOR TODAY
\$ 13.20 FOR THE GAME
\$??.?? TREASURE BONUS
(RESERVED) (CONDITIONAL = 53)

Supper was a table piled high with leaves. Even the meat loaf had green things in it. Mother was in that stage of gardening when she was spending fifteen hours a day just trying to keep up with the production.

A strong scent of spices and vinegar drifted in from the kitchen. Judith smiled at the thought that Lunae's sensitivities were infecting her own. She had seen other kids mimic the dress and habits of their online characters. But she wasn't going to start carrying a dagger up her sleeve!

Father had a distant, preoccupied look. Judith could sympathize with that condition better than her mother could. She and her father were the family members who spent the most hours on the terminals. The world on the other side of the glass tube absorbed one's attention.

Mother was giving a running commentary on her battles with the leaf miners and the fire ants. This was her year for trying totally organic gardening, and she constantly missed the use of her chemical weapons to fight against the ravening hordes.

Barry was unsympathetic. "Why don't you just use that white powder stuff you used last year? We won't tell on you."

"That's enough." Father had less interest in the war against the insects than Barry did, but there was such a thing as parental solidarity. "Barry, I won't need your help for a couple of days. It sounds like Mother could use a couple of spare hands with the garden. Starting in the morning."

"Aw! Come on, Dad! Jay and Toot and me, we've got a Commander game in the morning!" Barry visibly reined in his indignation and picked at the spinach leaves on his plate. To Judith's sisterly eye, it was an obviously staged acquiescence. Father would never stand for open disobedience.



"Just where were you going to have this game?" Father made the word sound indecent. "At home or at the arcade terminal?"

"Well," Barry said cautiously, "the graphics are better at Spacer's World than at home. And the faster baud rate there would give me an edge."

"Just how were you going to pay for the time?"

Barry glanced up at his father's impassive face and spotted the smirk on Judith's. He mumbled something no one could hear and took another bite of the salad.

Father continued. "If I recall correctly, you blew all of last week's allowance on Commander. I heard you ask your mother for some money yesterday. Since allowance day is the day after tomorrow, I don't see where you could have gotten any money to pay for your game tomorrow. Since I don't suppose Spacer's World gives credit, you wouldn't be able to play there tomorrow anyway. And since your games account suspension here at home doesn't run out for another two weeks, you couldn't play here either. So, it seems to me that you will have plenty of time to help your mother in the garden. Isn't that right?"

Judith felt a little sympathy for Barry. Not much, but a little. Father's logical traps were painful. There were ways to pay for game time that Barry could have lined up, but these were either forbidden or unacceptable methods. Who in the family could forget the time Barry's games account was suspended because he had charged several games to Father's business account?

"Judith," her mother asked, "could you help me clean up after supper? I need to run to the store."

Judith resigned herself to the delay and nodded. Now was not the time to plead that she had a game in progress. Barry shot her a sneer on general principles.

BARTON CREEK MALL HAD CHANGED OVER the years. Judith didn't particularly like to shop there with her mother. It was a fun place if you went there with friends, but mothers were different. Most of the larger department stores had gone online and were gradually deserting the shopping malls. Sears and JCPenney had left, leaving their areas subdivided into a maze of market stalls. The mall was the place to go to sample a dozen varieties of egg rolls, to buy hand-carved earrings, or to lose a few hours in a Commander booth.

A trio of players, just old enough to grow beards, were waiting for a booth outside the entrance to an arcade and watching the pair of them as they walked by. Mother didn't seem to notice, but Judith was glad she wasn't alone. Lunae could handle any trouble from the likes of them, but Judith wouldn't even know how to handle one of her sleeve daggers.

She shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts. Those boys weren't like her thief, out for trouble in a lawless world. Maybe the mall did have some permanent residents that were a bit smelly, but no one was going to accost her mother and her during prime time.

They shopped their way through a bottle shop, an herb market, and an office supply house. Then, at Judith's urging, they stopped for a slice of pizza.

"We're not too far from Reitz. Did you want to stop and get that practice book you asked for?" Mother asked.

"No. Not tonight." Diana worked at that shop. She didn't want to see her just yet.

Mother frowned and put down her pizza. "Now, Judith, you aren't going to give up on your music just because Brentwood Academy doesn't have a school band program, are you? They have a nice orchestra!"

"No! I'm not going to quit." Judith bit back on sudden anger. "I like my music. It's you and Father who are trying to take me away from all the good teachers and all my friends."

"Now, Judith. You know we are only trying to get the best education for you and Barry. Brentwood isn't a big high school, but they have excellent teachers."

"And no music program."

"No band. They do have an orchestra. Are you sure you are interested in the music, not the football games?"

"Mother, that's not true!" And with a flushed face, Judith left the table and headed out of the shop. Her mother, a little flushed herself, picked up the packages and followed.

Judith paid no attention to the other people in the mall as she made for the parking lot. *I'll show them. I'll get the money, go to the music camp, and make a showing that'll force them to see where my talents lie.*

LUNAE WOKE WITH ONLY THE LIGHT OF A single glowstone to greet her. <TAKE INVENTORY, STATE HOW I AM> She was hungry. But there were no torches, no food, no water. The leather band was still looped over her shoulder.

If it weren't for that, she might have given up right there. Dying would cost her nothing, but reincarnating in another character would. And while still in possession of a rare, possibly magical, artifact, she just might survive and turn her find into a treasure bonus.

The chamber—from what she could tell by feel and from examination at a nose-bumping distance with glowstone in hand—looked exactly like the chamber in which she spent the previous night. She stuffed the glowstones under her tunic and unbolted the door.

<SMELL, LISTEN> The musty scent gagged her. If there were any scent of her thief, it was masked. She just stood there, engulfed by the odor. Something about it seemed to dull her reactions. To her right, from the direction she had come, she heard a scraping, plopping, near-liquid sound, as if three tons of gelatin were moving down the corridor toward her.

<GET BACK INSIDE THE CHAMBER, LOCK THE DOOR> Her body started to move in response to her intent; however, it didn't follow through. Her arm reached for the door, but it stopped in midair. It was the numbing scent that had her in its spell.

<TURN LEFT> She half turned. The sound of the approaching creature was noticeably nearer.

<TURN LEFT> Now that she no longer faced her approaching doom, talk overheard at the Wizard's Gate came back to her. This was the Catacomb's garbage collector. It was so huge that it entirely filled the width and height of the corridor; it digested anything organic in its path. Nothing she had heard, however, warned her of its stupefying scent.

<MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD> It worked! <MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD> She moved. Okay. Simple actions only.

<MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD> She wasn't moving fast, but neither was her musty friend. <MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE LEFT FOOT FORWARD, MOVE RIGHT FOOT FORWARD> . . .

Fifty yards ahead of the gelatinous mound, the effects of the scent began to lessen, and she broke into a run. Still sightless, she tried to pace herself, so that striking a wall wouldn't hurt her too badly.

Several times, she scraped her arm against the left side of the corridor as she drifted too close to the wall. The surface wasn't exactly smooth, more like mason work than natural stone. This corridor resembled the one she had traveled prior to finding the glowstone chamber, so she was not surprised when her fingertips felt a large stone door. She stopped.

The blob of gelatin was far behind, but she had no doubt that it would get to her soon enough if she didn't find shelter. She tried the door. It opened with a popping, grinding sound.

To her light-starved eyes, the glowstone seemed to light the chamber brightly. The stench of Tor beast mixed with the old scents of spice, mule, and the faint odor of her thief. The same chamber? Was her sense of direction that far off?

But first things first. She picked up a familiar boulder and barricaded the door separating her from old acid-and-quivery. Her warped sword slid quickly from its sheath, and she made a quick attack on the hidey-hole and skewered the empty air hiding there. Only then did she barricade the other two doors and take time for a survey.

The Tor beast was nothing more than a small mound of rich soil—as was the severed arm. The same decay had taken it as well. The beast had thoroughly destroyed her supplies, so nothing usable was left. Her thief was still her only hope. She found the source of the spring and drank, then she unblocked the doors and followed her nose.

It was puzzling. The air of this corridor did not include the musty scent, but it was scented strongly with the smell of her thief. But it was the same one—wasn't it?—that she had looped around just hours before. She paced slowly and silently. The only sound was an occasional grumble from her stomach. When her fingertips failed to find the chamber again, she began to doubt her memory.

Okay, this is a different corridor. I missed a turn somewhere. But this is my thief's trail. She slowed her pace, trying to coax images from the darkness and to read messages into the scents.

The air was more moist here than in the glowstone chamber. There was the scent of her thief and other people, but his was the strongest. There was no trace of the pack animal or the spices, but torches aplenty had passed this way. There were a dozen fainter smells, some too elusive for her to place, but a mental picture of the place could be etched.

Her thief was just that: a thief. It wasn't a case of two paranoid adventurers having a casual shootout with the victor taking the spoils. Her thief regularly patrolled this set of corridors. He used the hidey-hole in the glowstone chamber—and undoubtedly secret places in other chambers—to waylay adventurers who passed by, collecting any treasures from his victims. No one who prowled this world could have any pretense of a moral position, but knowing what kind of person he was, it made it a little easier to do what she planned.

Finally, the corridor branched at a T-junction. The scent was freshest to the left, so she followed it. Not a hundred yards past the branch was a chamber door blocked open. There was no light within. He was in there. She knew it.

She made no sound, and she had no light. There was a very good chance that he was not expecting anyone. Even if he expected her to follow, he had left her with torches. Could she sneak inside and surprise him? Did she have a chance? She had no supplies. He was probably well stocked. At any moment, he could close and bar the door against the creatures of the catacomb for his nighttime snooze.

She shed the sword and hid the glowstone where it would not betray her position. One dagger she held with her teeth. Carefully, she slipped through the doorway and flattened out against the wall on the inside. She intended to stay motionless like that until he betrayed his location.

Pfft! There was the sound and the sudden sting of a dart in her left hand.

Oh no! Not again!

<SLIP TOR ARMBAND HALFWAY DOWN ARM, TWIST ARMBAND INTO TOURNIQUET WITH THE DAGGER IN MY TEETH, PLUCK OUT DART, FALL DOWN, HIDE LEFT ARM UNDER MY BODY>

Her arm and hand began to throb uncomfortably under her, but the poison was contained, at least for the moment. With her good hand, she fished out the other dagger. She played possum.

A rustling sound was masked by the rocks. The thief was lighting a torch.

"Very good, whoever you are. And if you are still awake."

The light flared, and she closed her eyes to slits.

"Oh, it's you! Little Miss Ruby with all the nasty stuff in her pack. You must be pretty hard up to track me down for just a little trinket like that. Or are you one of the feuding, vengeful types?"

She spotted him working carefully around the rocks. The patter was just to lull her, if she were faking it. He was keeping shelter until he could get a good look at her. Lunae added some protective coloration. Her mouth slowly opened, and a trickle of spittle drooled out. Consciously, she checked every muscle to make sure it



was relaxed. She made no effort to watch what he was doing, relying on her ears to place him.

It worked. He came from behind his cover and stood beside where she lay. He wedged the toe of his boot beneath her to turn her over. He pushed.

As her body rolled, her bound arm snapped out and grabbed his ankle. She yanked. Standing on one foot and burdened with his blowpipe and sword, he toppled. Her dagger caught him in the arm. It wrenched from her hand. Grasping for anything that could be a weapon, she caught his blowpipe. She clubbed him with it. The slender tube snapped in two, but he slumped out.

She stood. He was crumpled and bleeding from the knife wound, unconscious on the ground. His torch flickered erratically where it had fallen on the stone floor.

Lunae labored for breath, light-headed. A familiar buzzing sounded behind her ears. The tourniquet must have slipped a little in the battle. Another twist on the dagger's handle tightened the force on the armband painfully. She would have to let it go soon or risk damage to the arm.

The torch flared yellow when she picked it up. There were two doors, and she blocked them both. This chamber was slightly smaller than the other, but it also had a spring. Again, there was a small but comfortable-looking hiding place.

Where he was sprawled on the ground, Lunae had the opportunity to see how large her thief really was; and he was big. She stared at the oozing wound for a moment before tearing a strip from his shirt and placing a pressure bandage over the wound. He was still alive and too dangerous to leave alone. She sought one of his darts from the broken blowpipe and stabbed him in the arm with it. Tying him up would be best, but . . .

it was getting . . . very difficult to move. Waves roared in her ears.

She slumped down and prepared to sleep it off. The dagger slipped a turn or two, loosening the band. Her arm and hand were an unhealthy blue.

Horror struck as she saw his eyes open, watching her. She tried to tighten the band and to get to her feet, but her legs wouldn't move. Slowly, he pulled himself up on his hands and feet and crawled toward her. She forced one knee up. Her leg was a lead weight.

"Sorry." His words came slowly. He was weak. "Immune to my own venom."

She was trapped by her own weight. One arm was paralyzed; one held desperately to the tourniquet. She couldn't get up.

He came relentlessly on. "Should have killed me. I should . . . have killed you." His hand reached hers and forced the tourniquet loose. "Both . . . too civilized . . . for this game."

YOU HAVE BEEN RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS BY A
POISON DART. YOU ARE LOGGED OFF CATACOMB
FOR 01:30 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:
\$ 2.21 FOR TODAY
\$ 13.83 FOR THE GAME
\$???.?? TREASURE BONUS
(RESERVED) (CONDITIONAL = 53)

Judith stared at the screen. It was almost midnight, and the house was silent and dark, except for those glowing green letters on her screen.

Defeated twice in one day! This was supposed to be entertainment? She was feeling depressed.

Another hour and a half. Could she manage to stay awake long enough to log back on then? It was her only chance to turn the tables. Tomorrow would be a busy day with no time for this.

The treasure bonus puzzled her. <RUN 53>

CATEGORY 53 TREASURES ARE GENERALLY MAGICAL IN NATURE AND ARE WORTHLESS UNLESS PROPERLY USED. THEY CANNOT BE SOLD TO THE WIZARD OF THE GATE, SINCE HE WOULD TAKE THEM WITHOUT PAYING FOR THEM. THE VALUE SHOWN IS ONLY AN ESTIMATE OF THE TRADE VALUE OF THE ITEM.

Strange. There's no value shown. What does that mean? Is it the armband? If so, I should have seen that message before.

Judith tapped a key that disconnected her terminal with the timeline. Then <RESPOOL, \$.1800-2000> Back across the screen scrolled everything she'd seen or done on the screen between six and eight that evening.

There it is! I must have missed it trying to get down to supper. It has to be the armband.

With that resolved, she put on her muffs, plugged them into the terminal, and keyed a wake-up.

LUNAE WOKE TO YELLOW LIGHT AND THE smell of bacon and fresh trail bread. As she tried to lift her head, her whole body shook from hunger, fatigue, and the residual effects of the poison.

"Ah, good. I was hoping you wouldn't be out very long. Here." Her thief handed her a trail sandwich. She had no heart to protest. It vanished quickly.

The thief was even taller than she remembered, now that she was on the ground and he was standing.

"Not too bad looking," he commented, echoing her own thoughts, "even with some very sharp-looking teeth." He sat down on a rock next to her and handed her a bottle. While she made its contents vanish as well, he rambled on, "Of course, in this world, all you see are beautiful specimens or characters who like to make themselves deliberately horrifying. But most opt for beauty and strength, when they have any choice in the matter."

Lunae handed him the bottle. <SAY: "THERE WAS SAND IN THE BOTTOM. BUT THANKS. I LOST MY SUPPLIES.">

"I noticed that." He took her bottle and put it back among his things, even turning his back on her. By reflex, she reached for her knives and found them properly sheathed. He turned back to her. "I knew you would be out for a while—what with two doses of the dart in one day—so I tried to find your supplies. The sword was close, but all bent up. I backtracked to the Blue Chamber and saw your stuff. Frankly, from what I saw, I am very surprised you are still here. What got after you?"

<SAY: "A TOR BEAST.", TRY TO SIT UP AGAIN> She made it this time.

He saw her effort and offered her a hand to a more comfortable seat on a water-smoothed boulder. "Maybe it's a good thing I didn't kill you. It might be handy to know someone who can survive a Tor beast attack. How'd you do it?"

<SAY: "I KILLED IT.">

"That I don't believe. But tell me the tale anyway. You wouldn't believe how lonely this job is."

And so she did. The whole thing. Maybe Lunae wouldn't have divulged everything without taking some advantage in trade, but it was late at night and Judith was a bit lonely herself. Her thief made an appreciative audience, commenting appropriately during the telling.

<SAY: "AND I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR NOT KILLING ME, TWICE.">

"You did the same for me. I didn't come to until you were halfway through with the bandaging. I appreciate it. Surviving another day here pays the grocery bill offline."

<SAY: "YOU MEAN YOU REALLY MAKE A LIVING AT THIS?">

"This life of crime, you mean?"

<SAY: "WELL, YES.">

"You have it in a nutshell: I live online. What I make from Catacomb has to be enough to pay for my bread and access charges, or I go hungry. Thievery is just a matter of the odds. I tried searching for treasure in every cubbyhole, but it turned out that I made more by surviving attacks from other characters and pocketing their findings than I could make on my own. When I bought the blowpipe and turned thief professionally, it even had some moral advantages. My victims usually survived. I'm really quite good at it. Rumor back at the Gate has it that the Phantom Thief is a native of Catacomb and can't ever be caught or killed."

<SAY: "I STILL DON'T KNOW WHETHER I COULD BE A THIEF, EVEN AS AN ONLINE CHARACTER.">

"Didn't you say you were an assassin?"

<SAY: "YES, BUT">

"Yes, but what?"

<SAY: "I DON'T KNOW. YOU'VE GOT ME CONFUSED. LET'S GO BACK TO TALKING ABOUT YOUR SINS. WHY CAN'T YOU WORK FOR A LIVING OFFLINE?">

For a moment, there was no response. Then, "Don't laugh, but there is a very good reason. Denver's child wage laws keep employers from hiring people of my age. Next year I'll be nineteen, and I won't have that excuse. You'll have to wait until then to tell whether I'm a sociopath or just a bright kid beating the system."

<SAY: "FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, I'M SEVENTEEN, AND I DON'T THINK AUSTIN HAS THAT KIND OF LAW. BUT WHY ARE YOU HAVING TO MAKE A LIVING? I'LL STILL BE IN SCHOOL AT YOUR AGE.">

"That, my sweet, is the fate of everyone who's unlucky enough to be missing a set of parents and too cantankerous to abide by the whims of the state juvenile system. As long as I'm not arrested for an offline crime, the people here will let me make my own way. And to tell the truth, if I must be a thief, I'd much rather be one in a world like Catacomb, where such behavior is expected.

"And now for your sins. What is a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Judith told her whole plan. She spoke of her goals of making enough money to attend the music camp and to win a first-chair position. By her parents taking her out of the public-school system, away from her friends, and

putting her in the academy, she wanted to show them that they would be depriving her of her true vocation.

"Whew! Angel, you make me feel old. I'm not going to discourage you by telling you what I think of your chances, but I must say I have every respect for your ambitions. If I had a spare \$300, I'd share it with you. But . . ."

The dollar sign on the screen triggered a memory, and for a moment, Lunae considered how to get the armband back from her thief and how to learn its secrets. Then Judith spilled the beans. She filled him in on the unusual logoff message she'd received, even replaying it and the condition code description back from her terminal's local memory. Afterward, she explained her theory about the armband.

"Angel, this is not how you're supposed to play this game. I'm supposed to kill you; you're supposed to kill me; and we're both supposed to steal each other's treasures."

<SAY: "AS GHOSTS, I SUPPOSE?">

"I wouldn't put it past us, in this world. But in any case, you've hit me with a problem. If your theory about the Tor teleportation magic and the armband is correct, then I am just the person to make the best use of it. I've used many of the magic spells of this world, and I know how they work. After all, that's how I spotted your last attack. Also, I've been all over the catacombs, and I know where there are several treasures only a teleporter could get at. So I should cut your heart out, steal your artifact, and go to it. Instead, I'll have to trade you for it. All I've got is a busted blowpipe and treasure worth about fifty dollars in real money."

Judith thought about it for a moment. The Lunae in her clamored for a better deal, a percentage of the take. But as it was past four in the morning, Catacomb seemed far less real to her than a nice boy beating the system in Denver.

<SAY: "THROW IN A GOOD SAFE ROUTE BACK TO THE GATE AND IT'S A DEAL. I'VE BEEN LOST IN THIS MAZE FOR THREE DAYS NOW.">

THE DAY WAS AN ORDEAL BECAUSE JUDITH never went to sleep, even after her thief shooed her off into a safety chamber and thus back into the offline world. She could barely drag herself through her chores. And Barry was no help at all. Deprived of his Commander game, his second-best sport was sister baiting. She was grateful when Mother forced him out into the garden at spade-point. Therefore, Judith didn't mind at all that she was stuck with the job of making sure that Georgie didn't get into anything but harmless trouble.

The day passed, but she never got logged back onto Catacomb. Alone, finally, after the evening meal, she fell asleep.

Morning brought a tempest. Barry rushed out of the house with Jay, and a call to Jay's mother brought the information that the pair had gone off to the mall to play Commander. The news of Barry's rebellion brought Father down from his office and put him into a black mood. He picked up the cane he always used for

walking in public, drafted Judith to be his scout, and left for the mall with her.

Judith thought her father looked very impressive, especially so when he was angry. Though he limped and carried a cane in public, his image was of a person in control. Walking beside him through the crowd, her Lunae perspective made her wonder just how handy a club his cane would make. She headed for the arcade.

Barry was there, joking with some friends around a Commander booth. The place was packed, mostly with boys Barry's age and older. Today, they seemed much less threatening to her. In an uncharacteristic burst of sympathy, she didn't report his location immediately to Father.

"Hello, Barry."

He was surprised to see her. "Hello, Sis."



"There's a man with a cane outside who has brought a message for you."

"Oh." His face paled a bit, but the light was low. "Jay, I've gotta go. See ya." And he was gone. His friends looked puzzled.

Judith smiled sweetly and explained, "Business." Then she walked off.

Halfway to the door she overheard: "... played Catacomb like never before. The Alien Worlds column said he made a mint."

There was an empty Catacomb booth. She slid into the seat and fed the machine a pair of coins.

LUNAE AWOKE IN A ROOM NEAR THE NOISY babble of the throng at the Wizard's Gate. Her pillow was large, lumpy, and hard. Pinned to her sleeve was a note.

Dear Angel,

Sorry we didn't make this last connection. It worked. I've never had so much online fun since I started playing. Once I got to the right places, I found more gold in this world than I dreamed.

I've fulfilled my part of our bargain, though this Lunae of yours fights like a devil when you're not inside her. I had to poison her again to get her back to the Gate. The bed is only rented for a week, since I figure you'll connect up before then.

This may be the last time we talk. I have a strong feeling they'll lock me out of this world when I go cash in my coins.

*Kisses for my Angel,
Your Thief.*

Judith keyed the logoff.

YOU HAVE REACHED A SAFE PLACE. YOU MAY NOW ADJUST YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCES.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:
\$ 0.05 FOR TODAY
\$ 18.34 FOR THE GAME
\$ 534.25 TREASURE BONUS

DO YOU WISH TO CASH IN YOUR TREASURE {Y/N}?

DO YOU WISH TO PAY YOUR GAME ACCOUNT {Y/N}?

Oh, Thief! We only bargained for fifty. I don't even know your name. And you don't know mine.

Judith closed out her character and the game. Her bank account swelled nicely. *There it is—all the money I needed, and more. How come I feel like I just lost the game?* On the screen, her bank balance timed out and erased itself.

She sat back for a moment in the booth. *They're waiting for me. I'd better go.* Her fingertips lightly tapped the keyboard. Then, on impulse, she typed:

<\$USANET\$.ALIENWORLDS//>

The screen began scrolling the article.

ALIEN WORLDS BY OSRET CHUNER {1}

CATACOMB {2} HAS BECOME THE WORLD OF THE MOMENT SINCE YESTERDAY'S ANNOUNCEMENT {3} ABOUT A DENVER PLAYER {4} WHO CASHED IN AT A REPORTED \$50,000. MANAGEMENT {5} OF CATACOMB, OF COURSE, MADE A BIG SPLASH OF IT, HOPING TO ATTRACT MORE PLAYERS. AND IT'S WORKING, IN SPITE OF MY WARNING —

<RUN 4>

DENVER PLAYER CASHES IN BIG IN CATACOMB. {1}
{DENVER POST} {2}

EARLY THIS MORNING {3}, THE MANAGEMENT {4} OF CATACOMB HELD A PRESS CONFERENCE, AWARDING A CHECK FOR \$50,355.75 AND A SPECIAL EMERITUS RANKING {5} TO AN UNNAMED DENVER PLAYER {6} FOR HIS FEAT OF LITERALLY BURYING THE WIZARD'S GATE {1} UNDER SACKS OF GOLD AND JEWELS. IT WAS SAID BY PLAYERS —

<RUN 6>

INTERVIEW WITH DENVER PLAYER POST: I HEARD YOU MENTION THAT YOU HAD HELP FROM AN ANGEL IN YOUR AMAZING WIN. DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS TO OTHER CATACOMB PLAYERS FOR INVOKING ANGELS?

PLAYER: SORRY—BUT TO GET THAT CHECK, I HAD TO SIGN AN AGREEMENT THAT I WOULDN'T SAY ANYTHING TO ANYONE ABOUT CATACOMB.

POST: CAN YOU TELL US WHAT YOU INTEND TO DO WITH YOUR WINNINGS?

PLAYER: I THINK I'LL MOVE TO TEXAS. I HEAR AUSTIN IS A NICE TOWN.

AT HOME, WITH BARRY IN THE GARDEN helping Mother, Judith again watched over Georgie. She played over in her mind all that her thief knew about her and all that she knew about him. Father, on the other hand, paced downstairs and never once went back up to his office.

Since he hovered around so long, Judith was finally prompted to say, "Daddy, don't worry so much about us kids. Barry wasn't being defiant. I noticed the expression on his face in the arcade when he realized his mistake. He was with his friends, and he just forgot about the gardening.

"As for me," she smiled, "I've been a pain about the new school. I'm sorry. I know it won't be as bad as I made it out to be. There will be plenty of new friends to make. And in fact, I can think of some advantages of being the only female flute player at Brentwood Academy." ■



DENNIM AND THE GOLEM

BY ROBERT S. BABCOCK

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHAN PEREGRINE



IGHTFALL IN THE MOUNTAINS was like nightfall in the city for Dennim. Shadows—home—grew and prospered; darkness, which blinded others, keened his eyes and ears as nothing else could. The sounds were different, to be sure, but hearing a centurion sneak up from behind was almost the same as hearing a cat poised to attack. And the awesome mountains of Kenna held something that had eluded Dennim for all of his life in the city: everlasting treasure.

Dennim was a hobgoblin and a thief, and both identities had caused him discomfort many times. In the villages at the foot of Kenna's mountains, a child born of mountain goblin and lowland human was neither as unusual nor as humiliated as in the larger city. But justice against an apprehended thief in Montgate and other small villages was swift and brutal, far worse than the labors and imprisonment issued in Kenna City. There was a best and worst in both places, just as there was Whitefire and Darkfire. The best in Kenna City were those shadowy streets and questionable taverns, where a demihuman might be welcome and a thief could earn a living. The best in Montgate and the villages were these nearby mountains and the secrets that they hid.

The jagged opening in the mountain face was exactly where the map Dennim had memorized indicated it would be. It was a tall, human-sized, but cleverly concealed entrance. From his pack, Dennim pulled out some of the corn ears he had stolen in Montgate for luck. He arranged these ears in a tottering pile at the cave entrance. On top of the pile of corn, he balanced rocks and a few coins. Anyone or anything following him would topple the standing ears, and Dennim's sensitive hearing would pick up the noise. This done, he crept inside.

The map, which Dennim had stolen in Kenna City, had recorded this place as a monastery, but it was like no monastery that he had ever seen. The jagged entrance widened into a full room, barely lit by the moon outside. Once inside, Dennim moved quickly to the right-hand wall, which was clammy and rough. Running water had probably carved out the cave, as it did not appear to be the work of humanoids or tools. There were no torches, no offering fires. While there were dark forms scattered about this near part of the room, none of them resembled the shape of the traditional Whitefire vault that Dennim was here to loot.

He pulled an ear of corn from his pack and tossed it toward the dark center of the room. It landed with a quiet splash, which echoed to his goblin's ears but quickly ended. All was quiet again. He tossed another ear as far as he could into the darkness. It didn't land,

or it landed on something soft, or it landed beyond his hearing range.

"Or," he whispered, "just to be paranoid, something caught it."

Dennim smiled and slid his dagger out of its scabbard. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped the dagger into the air, heard it spin, and caught it by the blade. The best smith in Kenna City had made this knife, had formed it lightweight and streamlined for easy throwing. Of course, the smith hadn't made it for Dennim.

With his right hand, Dennim withdrew yet another ear of corn from his pack and tossed it in the same direction as he had the last, but only half as hard. It landed on stone, at floor level. He threw another ear in this same direction, harder than the last one, but softer than the first. It also hit rock, probably floor. The room was very deep.

Dennim turned his attention to the opposite wall, made visible only by the moonlight that filtered into the room. There were several large shadows and shapes against that wall. Though this was the wrong place for a vault, it was just right for an ambush. The next ear he threw found wall. The one after also hit stone, but was followed by the sound of claws scampering across stone and a sharp squeaking noise. Rodent? Or small cat?

Maybe.

Dagger arm raised, Dennim crept past the moonlit entrance, his small, crouched form briefly silhouetted onto the rocky floor. One by one, the shapes and shadows by the wall became distinguishable to his eyes. A stalagmite, nothing above it. A waist-high slab of rock. A sculpted metal foot.

Dennim leaped backward and nearly hurled his dagger. The foot was metal, shiny, and there was no sign of rust or scratches on any part that he could see. And it was more than just a foot. As he let his attention focus on a wider area, Dennim saw that it was a statue, taller by far than he, but in proportion, squat, and powerful looking. "And ugly," he murmured, gazing up at the too-wide, too-shallow, not quite human face.

Who would sculpt a statue of metal, since the material had so many better uses? Certainly not Whitefire monks, who preached Rikmon's pragmatism and conservation. Moreover, who could build it? Dennim straightened from his crouch, curious rather than cautious, flipping his dagger once into the air and catching it by the hilt. No seams, he noticed. No rivets or forge marks. He tapped the statue with the hilt of his dagger. As no echo sounded, it was either very thick or not hollow. He scratched it with the blade, but it wasn't metal flaked over stone, either.

"Rikmon's fire, you are ugly!" Dennim whispered, flipping the dagger back into its throwing position. He spoke in the singsong doggerel of outcast hobgoblin

society. "But you're too big to carry and too strange to sell, so what good are you? And why in Whitefire are you in this butt-backwards monastery?"

The statue's leg swung forward at the knee and kicked Dennim across the cave floor. He landed hard, unprepared. He ached in the belly, where it had kicked him; he hurt in his leg, where he had landed. Without thinking, he sprang to his knees and hurled his dagger with deadly accuracy.

The giant moon-gleaming arm swung forward. Stubby fingers flexed and delicately, ever so precisely, caught the dagger between metal thumb and forefinger.

Dennim stared, his jaw hanging to his chest. The statue had moved so quickly, and it had changed so much. It glowed now, not with moonlight, but from some inner source. Where once it had been dull and lifeless, it now had the sheen of a centurion's steel sword. It was fully alive, moving effortlessly and as nimbly as Dennim himself, and it moved toward him. Dennim's knife dangled between two shiny, stubby fingers.

Dennim retreated desperately. The thing made no noise as it walked and still showed neither seams nor joints where it might be vulnerable. It moved as effortlessly as a humanoid, though it was made of more metal than existed in all of Montgate. What could he do? Throw corn ears at it? He was dead. It would surely crush him.

The statue leaned forward at the waist. Then, with a long, powerful arm, it held out Dennim's dagger. It also stopped, and Dennim let himself breathe again. The thing's eyes began to glow. They didn't open, for they were not eyes. They glowed, growing intense as the light of a just-lit candle grows intense. Dennim felt that the thing was looking at him.

It turned its outstretched arm and rotated its big hand in such a way that the hand's metal palm was held open. Dennim's dagger fell across that palm. It was handing Dennim his dagger. Very hesitantly, open-mouthed, he reached out and took the knife. The metal statue straightened to its full height and did not move.

Dennim took one step backward and found wall. Water dripped off the rock and down his back, but he barely noticed it. The thing's eyes glowed stronger, and they lit the room so that what had been shadow was clear and what had been dark was shadow. Dennim allowed himself a quick look around, but standing as he was in the focus of the new light, he wished the statue would close its eyes.

The cave was perhaps thirty yards long, compared to but ten or so feet wide. There were strange stone statues and unfamiliar altars spread throughout the deep room, but not patterned in a way similar to Whitefire monasteries. Just the opposite, in fact, and Dennim suddenly realized how stupid he'd been. Of course this was nothing like a Whitefire room! This was just the opposite; it was not Whitefire, but Darkfire. Not Rikmon's house, but T'oori's. Evil. Lost. And this—Dennim glanced back at the huge statue in front of him—was Lost T'oori magic!

"Very good," a voice called from deeper within the cavern. "Dennim." At the sound of his name, Dennim turned from the statue. A figure in dark robes stood beside a long flat stone, perhaps halfway down the

cavern. "And your next thought, thief, is that there are riches to be taken here." The figure stepped onto the stone. "There are, and I have taken them. Come here."

Dennim's mind raced. He stepped around the huge statue and walked slowly toward the new figure, absently palming his dagger as he did. The thing with the glowing eyes followed him. The figure ahead had known his thoughts—more Lost T'oori magic—and probably knew them now as well. There was little that Dennim could do. Thinking not to think something was as good, or as bad now, as thinking it in the first place. He struggled to remember his Whitefire upbringing.

T'oori the Enslaver, master of Rikmon and Rikmon's wife Katelin, and of the pantheon of Landsman, Spain, and Linares. Rikmon had fought T'oori, the wicked enslaver who had a thousand eyes and arms. Their battle had been so fierce that from it had burst forth the sun and life on Kenna and the other islands. As Rikmon had fought with his blade and his heart, T'oori had held his evil magic in each of his thousand hands.

"The fiercer Rikmon fought," the dark figure called, "the more he injured T'oori. He cut off arms with his sword, yet as each arm fell to the world, so did a piece of Lost T'oori magic."

Dennim looked behind him. The statue was still there. As he kept moving, so did it. "Rikmon won," he said as defiantly as he could. "T'oori is Lost, while Rikmon is in God-Heaven, watching over the children he freed."

"And the magic?" the figure asked. "What of it, Dennim?"

"Lost as well, but lost in the many corners of the world."

"Found now, goblin! Found by me, and found by my brethren of the Darkfire! I have it. I have the power of Lost T'oori!"

Dennim glanced quickly behind him. The statue showed no change. "The hands of T'oori still clench Lost T'oori magic," he quoted.

"More Whitefire lies!" the figure shouted, his voice echoing through the cavern.

The figure was more in focus now, faceless still, but more detailed. In his hands, he held two dowel-shaped objects. Wands? The source of his—?

"I possess T'oori magic, thief. This one"—he raised his right hand—"renders me invisible to any whom I wish not to see me. And this one tells me your thoughts, goblin." When Dennim stopped walking, so did the statue. The man—it was a man beneath that hooded robe—was about fifteen feet away. "But I am not alone in my magic, Dennim. You too have an arm of Lost T'oori."

The man's face was visible beneath the hood, an old grey face lined with zealous fire, Darkfire. The man's brows tightened over his hawk nose, and Dennim did not need T'oori magic to know that whatever was upcoming was important.

"What did you say that brought the T'oori golem to life, Dennim? What were your words, exactly?"

Dennim smiled in spite of himself. He couldn't know, of course, because if he did, the Darkfire priest would have read his thoughts and known too. The priest nodded unhappily as if to confirm this. "It must have been an unconscious, unthinking slip of the tongue," the old man growled. "A saying, perhaps, or

an oath. Something you say often that cursedly sounds like the Lost T'oori commands which activate and control the golem."

Dennim fought against thinking over his collection of oaths and exclamations. He was not sure that he succeeded—can one truly know all of the thoughts running through the mind?—but the priest did not seem satisfied, so he had done something correct.

"I say many things," he said truthfully, "without thinking about them first. It is my nature."

"And you say much in that damned doggerel tongue," the priest snarled, reading Dennim's next thought,

They both waited a moment, but for different things. The priest's dark eyes looked past Dennim to the golem. "Nothing," he said. "Try again. Something that you say frequently."

Dennim thought of vivid goblin tortures to which he would subject the priest. He thought of methods and techniques of violence that only a goblin or hobgoblin could possibly conceive of. He colored his thoughts as graphically as he could, so that anyone sharing his thoughts would wince, if not cry out in pain. Aloud, he spoke in the human tongue. "Lost T'oori's eyes."

"A common enough exclamation," the priest agreed



"which I neither know nor can pronounce." The black-garbed figure seated himself upon the stone in one graceful motion, legs crossing effortlessly beneath him. "Very well, I have time and I will know the secret commands of the golem. Speak for me, Dennim. Speak for me in doggerel, if you like. Call me slime or toad, whatever you wish. I want to see what effect it has upon our friend behind you."

Dennim was curious, too, about many things. His mind raced once more, but this time with doggerel thoughts of the hobgoblin societies of Kenna City. He had to be careful, he realized, for so many of the thoughts and ideas were expressed in little more than bastardized human words. But his goblin father's heritage, whatever it was, flowed in Dennim's blood and occupied some part of his mind as well. Doggerel owed some of its existence to the hobgoblins who had grown up in the company and with the language of goblinkind.

"Darkfire priest," he said in doggerel, "you are T'oori's own private parts, shriveled and useless as T'oori himself."

calmly, "but one I've tried many times." Dennim thought he saw the man flash a smile. "And Dennim, the tortures of your father's race pale in comparison with the rites and practices of Darkfire. Think hard, thief. What did you say when you first saw the golem?"

Well, that was that. Dennim slumped back against the metal golem. Either the priest had lied when he said that he could not understand hobgoblin doggerel, or thoughts were thoughts, regardless of one's race or spoken language. In either case, there was nothing that Dennim could do. The priest was in complete control.

"Dennim," the shadowy figure said, "we really are much alike, you and I. We live by our wits, we take from lesser people. We lie, cheat, steal—we are better than normal people, more deserving of the riches of the world. You're a thief. Not a bad one, I gather. But think of how good you could be, of the things you could steal, if you were invisible to those you were stealing from! I'll give you this wand, Dennim, the wand and its secrets, if you can remember the secret of the golem."

The priest's voice grew more soothing. "I'm Darkfire, Dennim, but I am a priest. There are holy things upon which I can swear that I will uphold my side of any bargain we strike."

It was an idea that had crossed Dennim's mind. In fact, that was probably where the priest had gotten it—a point that disturbed Dennim considerably. Dennim was not Darkfire by any means, but neither was he Whitefire. Religious fires and other spiritual passions interfered with his independence. And what use had a thief for a lumbering golem that he only half understood anyway? The uses he could find for invisibility, however . . .

Another point that angered Dennim was the priest's offhand description of him. He quite agreed with the man's account of his thieving abilities, but he preferred to think of himself as a loner, an independent being holding his own against a hostile society, rather than the selfish, insensitive, almost evil being that the priest had described.

"Stop deluding yourself, Dennim, and let's get on with it. I can read all the thoughts of our ilk, so there is no escape. Cooperate and I will make it worth your while, for you'll share my treasure. Choose not to, and I will destroy you."

Our ilk? Selfish and evil ilk, selfish and evil thoughts. That must be it: the priest could only read selfish and evil thoughts! Just as Lost T'oori's weakness had been all that was true and good, all that allowed Rikmon to win their battle, so was there such a weakness in this T'oori relic. Again, Dennim smiled.

"I never said that the wands were infallible, Dennim," the priest said, "but surely someone such as yourself would still want to be invisible in order to steal? What I offer is still a good bargain: the wand for the secret of the golem."

True, Dennim agreed. Considering his profession, he could think of a great many profitable uses for the wand. But what uses had the priest for the golem? This was not a harmless man who sat before Dennim. The priest had probably given the better years of his life to this cave, this monastery. For a reason, a goal. For a dream, and undoubtedly not a very pleasant one.

The priest was going to kill him, Dennim realized. Even if by some wild chance, after days of trying, Dennim could remember the words that activated the metal golem, the priest was not going to let him live. Dennim did not want to die.

The man in the cloak said nothing, gave no reaction that Dennim could see. Perhaps for the first time, he could not read the thief's thoughts. Dennim felt the cool metal of the dagger he'd palmed beneath his sleeve.

Perhaps thoughts of survival were not selfish or evil, and were thus shielded from the wand. Perhaps.

Dennim raised his dagger arm abruptly, flicking his wrist strongly upward as if tossing a card in a Kenna City tavern. His dagger flew straight, rising in a deadly and true path until it buried itself deep in the Darkfire priest's throat. The man gurgled once and fell back. Then a terrifying bolt of green light sprang forth from the priest's left hand and shattered a slab of rock that had rested behind the golem. Dennim whirled to see the results: a mistake. Sickly dark ooze slunk forth from the rubble and slithered quickly up the wall of the cavern, where it slurped into a crack in the roof.

"Lost T'oori spits," Dennim growled, already diving to his right. A fiery green beam shot past him and brought rubble down from the far wall.

The problem with daggers, damn it, is that after you throw them they're gone!

Dennim had more problems, he realized. Not only was the priest not dead yet, but the golem was no longer still. As Dennim had moved, so had the metal creature—not mimicking him, but following him wherever he went. Now it stood towering over his crouched form. A green beam from the priest's hand struck the golem in the chest, which glowed green and sparkled orange momentarily before both colors vanished. The golem took another step toward Dennim.

Dennim rolled between its legs and to his feet, standing as close behind the golem's leg as he could without actually touching it. There was another burst of green and orange on the far side of the golem, but then silence loomed. Perhaps . . . ? But Dennim was not fond of *perhaps*. He crept from behind the golem. Then, hidden in the shadows created by the thing's glowing eyes, moved carefully to the cave wall. The golem cursedly

followed him, a clear giveaway as to where the priest should fire.

But there were no more bursts of the priest's green beam. Dennim, pursued by the golem, moved forward cautiously. The golem with its eyes was like a beacon. Dennim kept low and spied the priest whose body was collapsed over the slab of stone. In one quick surge of speed, he reached the slab. The golem lumbered behind. Dennim's dagger, bloodied, rested off to one side of the body. The priest had pulled it from his throat, but that might have been the last action the man ever took.

Dennim was a hobgoblin and a thief. His first identity had saved his life; his second might now make him rich. This narrow slab of stone, from where the priest never seemed to stray, must be the monastery's vault. In a Whitefire monastery, a vault contained the collected



offerings of the fervent. Dennim hesitated only briefly before investigating the vault of the Darkfire cave.

His fingers found the lock, a camouflaged masterpiece. It barely rose from the smooth surface of the vault. No depression for a key existed, so there was probably a spring somewhere. Dare he test it normally? Dennim slid his pack off his back and removed the small metal pins and wedges that were the tools of his livelihood. He wanted to tap the vault, but was far too leery to do so unprotected. He backed up, bumping into the golem's leg.

That gave him a brilliant idea. He slid around the golem, and the creature slowly turned to watch him. Pressing himself against the golem, Dennim reached his arms around one thick leg and tapped the side of the vault with an iron pick. He heard a small crack and what sounded like hail on a tin roof. After the sound stopped, he peered around the golem and found hundreds of tiny spikes littering the floor behind the creature. The golem's back and legs were unscarred.

With that kind of protection, Dennim had the lock sprung and the vault open in no time. As he had suspected, the Darkfire priests took in very little compared to their Whitefire counterparts. All he found were a few coins and assorted stones, all of which he slipped into his pack. He stood and looked down at the slumped corpse of the priest. The two dowel-shaped sticks lay beside the body, and on one of its fingers was a large ring within which was set a sparkling green stone. Dennim very carefully put each of these objects into the hidden lining of his pack.

Darkfire priests wanted power, perhaps so they could rule all of Kenna. They studied long and hard to obtain this power, and they apparently did not value the coin of Kenna's races. The treasure that they lived and died for was Lost T'oori magic.

IT WAS A BUSY NIGHT AT THE GOLEM'S LAIR. The farmers of Montgate, at last through with the harvest, hurried to their favorite tavern for a tall mug of ale and a tender leg of game. The proprietor of The Golem's Lair, a hobgoblin like about half of his customers, watched happily as the coins crossed the counter. His business was a great success; customers

DENNIM'S IRON GOLEM

The iron golem that is Dennim's companion has long malfunctioned as a side effect of the lost magic that powers it. Whoever speaks a special command phrase becomes bonded to the golem as its master (as Dennim is), but that lost command phrase remains unknown even to Dennim.

When bonded to a master, the golem stays close to that creature at all times. It moves with its master if the master gets too far away, returns dropped items, and performs other minor tasks at the DM's determination. It is not known whether other command phrases might allow the golem to perform additional tasks or engage in combat (which it presently does only by accident). Since Dennim found it, the golem has thankfully shown no ability to use the Poison Breath for which those constructs are known.

If the golem's bonding command phrase is ever discovered again, any creature can speak the phrase as an action to bond to the golem. If two creatures speak the phrase in the same round, they engage in a contest of Charisma to determine who the golem treats as its master in that round.

came in now for the service and the ale as much as for the tavern's novelty. Dennim was far wealthier than he had ever been as a thief.

There had been no way in which Dennim could have continued in his former profession. No thief lurks well in the shadows when he is forever followed by a towering metal statue, and sneaking up on would-be pickpocket victims was out of the question. The two wands and the ring were as great a mystery to him now as they had been the many times he had tried them in the Darkfire monastery. There were reasons why it took Darkfire priests years of study and practice to attain their goals, and, having encountered such a priest, Dennim realized that he simply did not have the consuming fire or the endless patience to do the same. The Lost T'oori magic remained lost.

Despite his initial findings, there had been a fortune in the monastery, just as his map had promised. Dennim was the richest person residing in the area of Montgate and its numerous neighboring villages. None of it would have happened had he not ventured into the cave. He smiled at more customers who were coming through the door and puffed contentedly on his pipe. Then he leaned back against the golem's leg and wondered for the thousandth time how much money he could have stolen had he ever rendered himself invisible. ■

DENNIM, HOBGOBLIN THIEF

Medium humanoid (goblinoid, human), neutral

Armor Class 16 (studded leather)

Hit Points 39 (6d8 + 12)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	18 (+4)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)

Saving Throws Dex +6, Int +3

Skills Acrobatics +6, Deception +3, Perception +3, Stealth +8

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Goblin, Thieves' cant

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Cunning Action. On each of his turns, Dennim can use a bonus action to take the Dash, Disengage, or Hide action.

Evasion. If Dennim is subjected to an effect that allows him to make a Dexterity saving throw to take only half damage, he instead takes no damage if he succeeds on the saving throw, and only half damage if he fails.

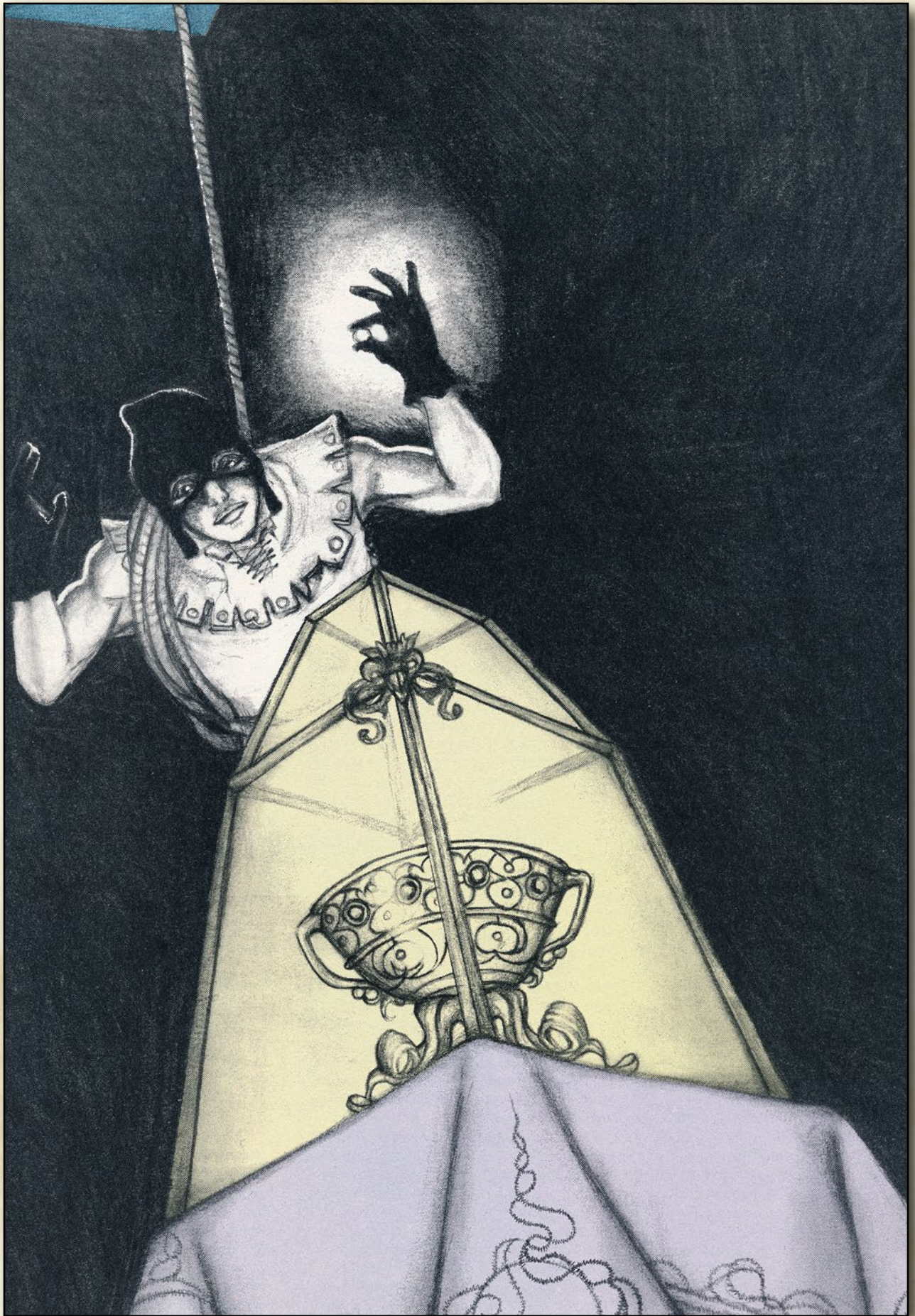
Sneak Attack. Once per turn, Dennim deals an extra 10 (3d6) damage when he hits a target with a weapon attack and has advantage on the attack roll, or when the target is within 5 feet of an ally of Dennim's that isn't incapacitated and Dennim doesn't have disadvantage on the attack roll.

Unexpected Strike. Any hit Dennim scores against a surprised creature is a critical hit.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Dennim makes two dagger attacks.

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d4 + 3) piercing damage.



THIEF ON A STRING

BY DEAN EDMONDS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DANIEL HORNE



HE ROPE SWAYED GENTLY, all but unseen in the shadows that filled the room. In spite of the liberal helping of grease that had been applied to the lip of the skylight, the rope gave off soft creaking noises as one of the shadows began sliding down its length.

"This should be close enough,"

Alcar thought to himself as he wrapped the end of the rope around his waist and tied it off with a secure knot. He then let go of the rope to hang spread-eagled above the display case, his soot-blackened face mere inches from the glass.

The Chalice of Corazor sat on a small velvet cushion within the planes of glass. To the naked eye, it appeared a simple golden goblet, giving no hint of the awesome powers that it supposedly contained. Alcar drew a small black pearl from a pouch on his belt.

As he brought it close to the case, the pearl began to glow. By the time it was within an inch of the glass, the pearl was brighter than the thief had ever seen it in the six years since he had "acquired" it, giving off enough light to read by.

Satisfied, Alcar put the pearl away and began clearing all nonessential thoughts from his mind, preparing it for the final assault. For a moment, all he could feel were the throbbing aftereffects of his rooftop battle a few minutes earlier, but he quickly pushed the pain to the back of his consciousness with an ease born of years of experience. Moments later, he was ready and reached out with every sense at his disposal.

Using this same technique, Alcar had discovered the demon guarding the roof before it had discovered him. Now his heightened perceptions were once again screaming their warnings at him. The slight asymmetry of the case stood out like a full moon in the dark of night. His fingers traced microscopic scratches in the glass as if they were bas-relief carvings. The faint scent of poison in his nostrils made him feel as if he were drowning in a vat of almond liqueur.

Alcar soaked up this barrage of sensory impressions, his trained mind distilling from it the fact that there were two traps on the case. One, a poisoned dart of devious simplicity, was swiftly disarmed. The other was magical in nature and was set to go off when the lid on the case was raised. That one would require a bit more care.

"Never rob a mage," the thief mumbled to himself. Those had been the parting words of his mentor, Altimar, when a much younger Alcar had set out to find his fortune in an unsuspecting world.

"But Altimar, old friend, even you would be tempted by stakes such as these!"

Alcar pushed a hard lump of gum arabic into his mouth and began kneading it with his tongue and teeth. Once the wad had softened up enough, he took it from his mouth and gently stuck it to one side of the glass case. A moment later, he pressed one end of a short, weighted string into the gum. The other end, he tied to his rope.

From out of the depths of his pouch, Alcar pulled a wooden stylus with a sparkling gem set into one end. Pressing it against the glass case, he traced out a rough circle centered on the lump of gum. The diamond on the tip of the stylus cut deeply into the glass, leaving a minute groove behind it that scintillated eagerly in the moonlight filtering down from above.

The thief next took out a tiny wooden mallet with cloth wrapped around its head and began tapping on the circular cut he'd made in the glass. After a dozen carefully placed taps, the circle of glass popped free, the weighted string pulling it safely away from the case to where it wouldn't accidentally set off the remaining trap.

Alcar smiled in greedy anticipation. For fifteen years, he had been stealing from others for a living, facing death or worse on an almost daily basis as he slowly built up his craft. The chalice represented the end of all of that. Even if he failed to learn the artifact's secrets and was forced to sell it, the proceeds would allow him to retire and live out the remainder of his days in indecent luxury.

He reached out with one hand to grip his fortune . . .

"Shala-gora," said an unfamiliar voice off to his left, and suddenly the thief found himself unable to move. A moment later, the room was bathed in light. Alcar tried to look toward the voice but couldn't make his muscles obey him. Fortunately, his heart and lungs seemed to be free of the disability.

"Foolish little thief," the voice said, moving closer. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you should never try to rob a wizard?" Alcar didn't bother to answer, not that he had much choice in the matter.

A pair of slippered feet moved into his field of vision, weaving a complex dance around the lurkers and other traps that covered the floor. Now a pair of gnarled old hands appeared and slipped a slim golden ring onto one of the fingers of Alcar's outstretched hand.

"You will make no attempt to escape," the voice intoned in a formal manner. "You will neither harm me nor touch my person. You will not take off the ring. You will not allow others to break any of my commands on your behalf." There was a pause, then: "Dinro-skeelat!"

With that last arcane phrase, Alcar suddenly found himself in control of his body once more. He took the

opportunity to look up at his captor—a tall, slim man in silken robes, his hair mostly white with the occasional fleck of black, remnant of a distant youth. Alcar needed no introduction to know that this was the mage Porozan, owner of the mansion that he had broken into.

The man was close enough that Alcar considered slugging him, but some form of magical compulsion refused to let him complete the motion.

“Congratulations!” the wizard said with a chuckle. “You made it farther than any of the others. You might even have succeeded, had I not taken into account the possibility that someone might manage to defeat Catarilzakptinablon.” He nodded toward the open skylight above. “You see, I had another of his fellow demons, bound to me, waiting on the spirit plane with orders to report to me if Catarilzakptinablon were ever to return.”

Porozan’s expression turned grim. “But now that they have both fulfilled their duties to me, their geases are broken and I shall have to summon up two more—a prospect which I do not much relish. Since you were responsible for the loss of their services, it seems only appropriate that you make it up to me in whatever way possible. Untie yourself and follow me.”

To Alcar’s amazement, he found himself immediately obeying the commands. It was all he could do to keep from tripping over the traps in the room in his haste to follow the wizard out.

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded.

“Lower your voice,” Porozan admonished him. “I don’t want you waking the neighbors.”

“Cork you!” Alcar tried to shout, but the words came out in a subdued whisper.

Porozan looked back at the thief with an annoyed expression. “You will henceforth speak to me with respect,” he commanded, “and you will address me as ‘Master!’”

“Go kiss a basilisk,” Alcar thought, but the words that found their way to his lips were: “Yes, Master.”

“That’s better.” Porozan turned and resumed his journey, the confused thief trotting obediently along behind him.

By this time, Alcar had begun to suspect that the ring on his finger was the source of his sudden, uncharacteristic subservience. He held it up to his eyes as he walked, noting the arcane runes etched into its golden surface. The thief could rotate the ring or slide it up and down his finger at will. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not bring himself to slip it all the way off.

Porozan came to a sudden stop in one hall and pointed at an ironbound door.

“That is the vault,” he informed his captive. “You are never to enter it, nor is any part of your body ever to come within five feet of it. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Master,” Alcar responded meekly, shuffling the requisite distance away from the door and glaring at Porozan the whole time.

The wizard noticed the look Alcar was giving him and smiled. “You might as well get used to it,” he said. “So long as I wear this ring, and you yours, you will be

forced to obey my commands.” He held up his right hand where a thin band of gold gleamed evilly on one finger.

Porozan moved the hand to stifle a yawn. “After all of tonight’s commotion,” he added, “I probably won’t be getting up until around 10 o’clock, but I’ll expect you to have my breakfast waiting for me then. Come along now and I’ll show you the kitchen.”

Alcar followed his new master down the hallway with a sinking heart.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT WEEK, ALCAR came to understand the powers and limits of the cursed ring he wore on his right hand. The ring forced him to obey any command that Porozan chose to give him, no matter how demeaning or self-destructive it might be. But the ring held sway only over Alcar’s actions, not his thoughts. Porozan could command the hapless thief to not escape, but he could not command him to not think about escaping.

Alcar began biding his time. Sooner or later, he knew, Porozan was bound to give him contradictory orders. That, the thief hoped, would provide him with a loophole through which he might escape.

The opportunity finally came late one evening, when the wizard commanded Alcar to give him a back rub. Although this contradicted Porozan’s earlier dictum about never touching his person, the thief was dismayed to find that his body swiftly responded, giving the mage a gentle massage, then backing off when done. When Alcar tentatively tried to touch Porozan again, he found that the old rule was firmly back in force. Apparently, the ring resolved contradictory orders by temporarily suspending earlier commands, then restoring them once the latest order had been fulfilled.

Alcar had to admit that this approach made sense, but that did nothing to ease his growing despair.

As the days turned into weeks, Alcar learned a grudging respect for the old wizard’s intellect. His commandments were all carefully worded and fitted together to prevent the thief from harming him or escaping from him. Alcar was confined to the mansion and banned from communicating with anyone else, be it a guest or a passerby on the street outside. But the one commandment that puzzled the thief the most was that which forced him to give a wide berth to the ironbound doorway in the mansion’s southern hall each time he passed that way.

Alcar had initially assumed that the vault contained Porozan’s valuables, and that the geas placed upon him to stay away from that room was simply the wizard’s way of protecting his possessions. But if that was the case, then why did Porozan later issue a commandment that Alcar could steal nothing from him? That would seem a bit redundant and wasteful—unusual traits for Porozan. Furthermore, if the vault contained the wizard’s valuables, then why in Dara’s name were the Chalice of Corazor and other priceless artifacts sitting in display cases in a room on the other side of the house?

The mystery of the vault deepened a few days later when a short, dark-skinned mage paid a visit to the mansion. Alcar had been a prisoner in Porozan’s home for better than a month now, and aside from deliveries,

this was the first visitor that the wizard had ever received in his home. Little wonder, too—the magicians greeted each other warily, sheathing themselves in so many layers of protective magic that the air between them shimmered and sparked.

"I've come here for the orb, Porozan," the visitor announced without warmth.

"You know my price, Gillamon," Alcar's captor replied, equally coolly.

Gillamon hawked and spat on the carpet. "It's extortion, you miserable ratbag! The Eggs of Morinar are worth a dozen such orbs."

Two hoops of colored light—one blue, the other green—spun about the carton fast enough to make Alcar dizzy.

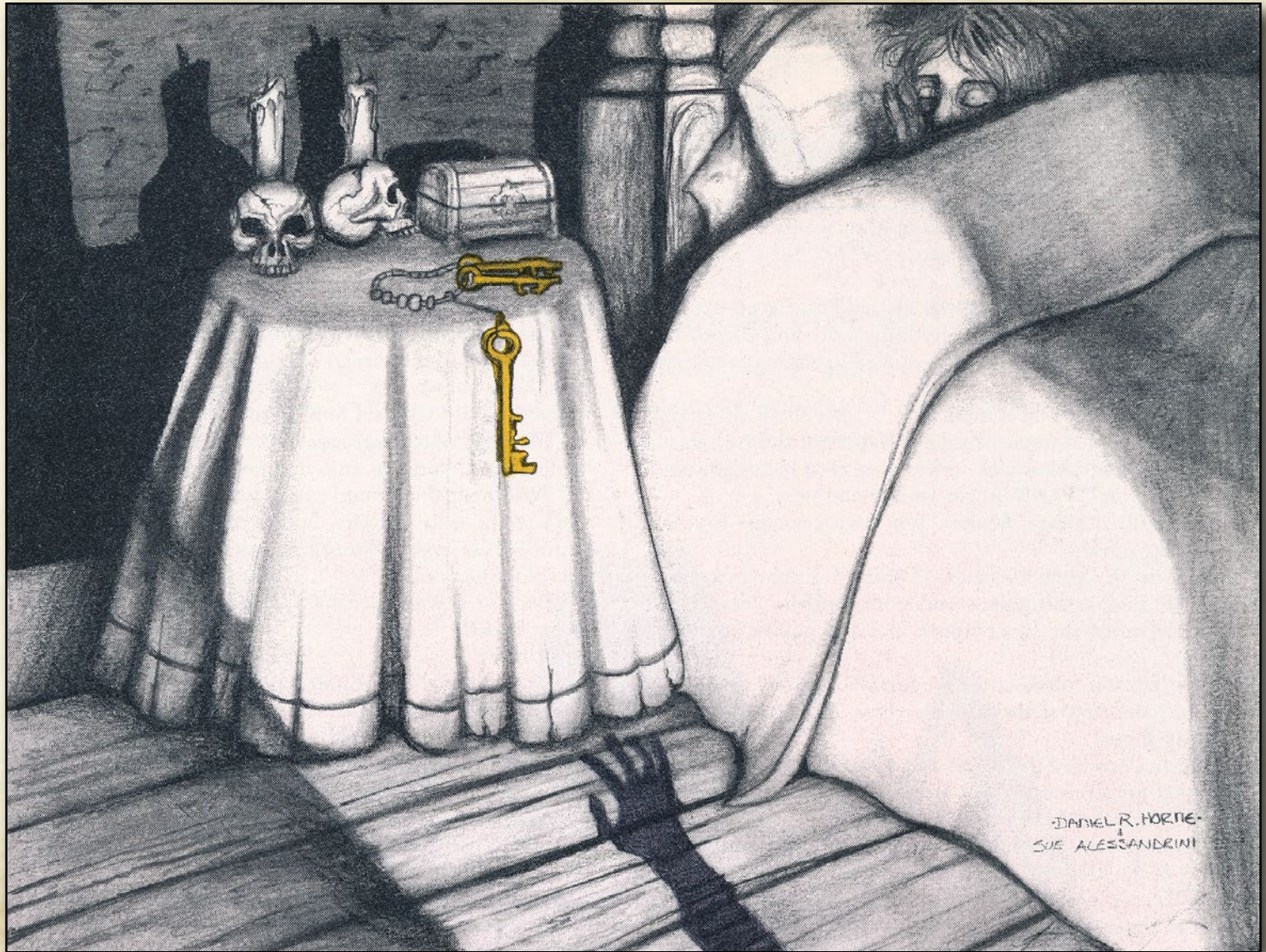
"Temporal stasis?" Porozan asked with a smirk.

"Aren't you being just a bit overcautious?"

Gillamon grunted noncommittally. "Maybe, but I'll bet you don't take the orb to bed with you at night, either."

"No, but I have my own, less extreme, precautions. If you'll wait here a moment, I'll go get the orb."

Porozan turned and, gesturing for Alcar to follow him, left the room and headed toward the vault. Once they were out of earshot, Porozan stopped and turned to face the thief.



"Ah, I see." Porozan rose from his chair. "If you feel that way, then I suppose we've no further business . . ."

"Fossilized dung heap!" Gillamon grated in a low voice. "Spare me your amateurish playacting. I have your price and will pay it."

The visiting wizard snapped the fingers of his left hand. There was a clap of thunder, and a silver egg carton appeared in the middle of the room with a dozen gray eggs in it, their surfaces giving off an oily sheen.

"Stand still a moment," he commanded. Then he took up the slim black wand that hung from his belt and pointed its silver-tipped end at Alcar. "Shalagora," he intoned, and for the second time in his life, Alcar found every voluntary muscle in his body frozen into immobility.

Porozan lowered the wand and wandered off down the hallway out of Alcar's sight. The thief's keen hearing was able to pick up the sounds of a key rattling in a

lock and a door being swung open on infrequently used hinges.

There followed a few moments of indeterminate muffled sounds before Alcar heard the door swing shut and its bolt click into place once more. A moment later, Porozan reappeared, now wearing gloves on his hands and carrying a glowing yellow iridescent sphere cupped between them.

"Dinro-skeelat!" he muttered, freeing Alcar from the wand's effects once more, but the thief hardly noticed.

What was so special about the vault, he wondered. Why would Porozan use the wand to hold him when a simple command would do? In fact, why bother with any special commands at all? The existing ones seemed to cover all the necessary contingencies.

As he followed Porozan back to the parlor, Alcar decided that it was high time he paid a visit to the vault.

ABOVE AND BEYOND EVERYTHING ELSE, ALCAR was a thief. That being the case, the litany he kept repeating in his mind was the complete antithesis of everything that he believed in.

"I'm not going to steal anything," he told himself for the umpteenth time, "I'm just going to borrow it. I promise to put it back immediately afterward. The ring will see to that."

Alcar was appalled at the degree to which his thieving skills had deteriorated during his weeks of slavery. He winced at the minute noises his picks made and the length of time that it was taking him to master the simple lock on Porozan's bedroom door. Prisoner or no, he promised himself that in future he would stay in practice.

If the ring had any consciousness of its own, Alcar's mental pleadings must have convinced it of his sincerity, for it did not interfere with his attempts to pick the lock. Moments later, he was able to swing the door open and creep stealthily inside.

The thief was already familiar with the layout of his master's bedroom, having been in it twice each day of his captivity: once to deliver breakfast in the morning and a second time later in the day to collect the dirty dishes and make up the bed. Alcar was pretty sure that Porozan would object to this midnight raid, but as the old mage had made no specific prohibitions in regard to the matter, the ring let the thief do as he pleased.

Being careful not to wake the sleeping wizard, Alcar picked up the old mage's key ring from where it lay beside the wand on the nightstand, then stole quietly from the room.

Back downstairs, he took a pair of straw brooms and tied them end-to-end, then strapped one of the keys from the key ring firmly to one end. Holding the whole rig out before him, he was able to slip the key into the lock on the vault door without coming within five feet of the door.

Alcar's knowledge of locks was such that he'd been able to pick out the correct key right away. Nonetheless, it still took over an hour of jiggling and adjusting his cumbersome rig before the bolt finally snapped back. He had to give his aching arms a few moments of rest

before he could find enough strength to prod open the vault door and peer in from a distance.

The vault was not very impressive. It was a small, austere, ten-foot-square room with shelf-lined walls holding all manner of bizarre and arcane-looking objects. The Eggs of Morinar sat in one corner, looking rather mundane without their twirling hoops of magic.

Alcar spared little attention for the contents of the vault; he was more concerned with the properties of the room itself. Drawing the black pearl from his pouch, he fastened it to the end of his makeshift pole and extended it toward the doorway.

The pearl glowed a bit as it approached the entrance to the vault, but not nearly as much as one might expect given that something as powerful as the Eggs of Morinar were inside. At least Alcar assumed that the eggs were powerful, given the way Porozan and Gillamon had treated them.

The pearl did not brighten appreciably as it got closer to the room, but the moment it crossed over the threshold, its light suddenly went out. Alcar hastily pulled back on the broomstick, fearing damage to his precious trinket, but the pearl's gentle glow returned the instant it was out of the room.

Alcar raised his eyebrows in surprise. Apparently, the vault was some sort of antimagic zone. That would explain why Porozan had banned the thief from entering the vault, and why he resorted to the wand whenever he wanted to visit it himself. If either Porozan's ring or Alcar's ring ever entered the vault, the geas would doubtless be broken, at least temporarily, allowing Alcar to slip off his ring and escape.

"All well and fine," the thief thought to himself. "But how does this buy me my freedom?"

Alcar's eyes flicked toward the Eggs of Morinar once more, and a crafty smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Perhaps there was a way after all . . .

WHEN ALCAR PREPARED POROZAN'S BREAKFAST the next morning, he carefully excluded the boiled eggs that were a regular feature of the wizard's morning meal. The mage noted their absence almost immediately.

"Where are my eggs?!" he squawked.

"They are downstairs, Master," Alcar replied. "Shall I bring them up here for you?"

"Yes, you fool!" he snapped. "Go fetch them! And be quick about it before the rest of my meal goes cold!"

The thief spun about and dashed speedily from the room, more to hide his smile of triumph than to obey his master's request for alacrity. Alcar's intent was to bring Porozan his eggs—his Eggs of Morinar, that is. That, of course, would necessitate entering the vault.

But the thief's smile quickly evaporated when he reached the bottom of the stairs and found his feet carrying him not toward the vault but back to the kitchen. Apparently, if there were multiple ways of fulfilling one of Porozan's orders, the ring would allow him to choose only the one that involved the least conflict with the wizard's previous commands.

Alcar boiled up two eggs exactly the way Porozan liked them, then carted them back up to the wizard's

bedroom, cursing the ring the entire time. If the elderly mage noticed his captive's sudden ill humor, he gave no indication of it, consuming his meal in silence.

Later that night, after he'd finished up all his household chores and dutifully practiced his lock picking skills, Alcar retired to his room and dropped onto the edge of his bed with a great sigh of relief. His plan with the Eggs of Morinar had required that he leave the vault unlocked from the previous night. With the plan's failure, he suddenly found himself in danger of discovery. Throughout the day, whenever Porozan headed down the southern hallway, the thief's heart would begin pounding so loud that he thought it would deafen him.

Fortunately, the mage found no reason to enter the vault, and Alcar's trickery went undetected. Now all that remained was to sneak back into Porozan's room, borrow the keys once more, and relock the vault. It was going to be another hour or two before the mage settled into deep slumber, and Alcar dutifully spent the time analyzing what had gone wrong with his plan.

Clearly, the ring had not been fooled by his deliberate misinterpretation of the wizard's command. Alcar was beginning to suspect that the ring had no intelligence of its own, but simply relied upon the wearer's understanding of the orders given him. So it wasn't good enough for Alcar to fool Porozan: he had to fool himself as well!

The thief shook his head in despair. He'd heard about some fakirs who were able to put a person into a deep trance and thereby convince them of things that were blatantly untrue, but it was not a technique that Alcar had any mastery of. And even if he did, the ring probably wouldn't let him use it on himself, as that would eventually lead to escape—which was clearly against Porozan's orders.

So if he couldn't get into the vault himself, maybe he could get the wizard to go into the vault without using the wand. Alcar's heart skipped a beat. That was it! He could replace the wizard's wand with a powerless stick, then . . . but no. Once again, the ring would interfere, as that would ultimately lead to a violation of Porozan's prohibitions against theft and escape.

And that, Alcar realized, was the crux of the matter. He could lay any escape plans he chose, but he would be prevented from carrying them out so long as he wore the ring and Porozan its twin: the wizard's orders would see to that. Therefore, he had to find some hole in the orders themselves. Something that would let him escape without interference from the ring.

Alcar took out a sheet of paper and a stylus, then began listing all the commandments that Porozan had ever given him. This was not a simple task, as he had never bothered to commit them to memory; he hadn't needed to with the ring watching over him all the time.

After an hour of racking his brain this way, Alcar decided that he could ignore all of the short-term commands, such as "sit down," "bring me my slippers," and so forth, and just concentrate on those that were worded in a permanent fashion. The list he ended up with was surprisingly short:

1. Do not try to escape.
2. Do not harm Porozan.
3. Do not touch Porozan.
4. Do not take off the ring.
5. Do not allow others to break any of Porozan's commandments.
6. Always speak to Porozan respectfully and address him as "Master."
7. Do not enter the vault or come within five feet of it.
8. Do not leave the mansion.
9. Do not communicate with anyone except Porozan.

Alcar whiled away the night, gazing at his list, looking for some inconsistency, some hole that would allow him to escape. But that was the problem: any hole he did find would lead to escape, which would be prevented by rule number one, and probably by rule number four as well.

Growling with frustration, Alcar hurled his stylus down onto the bed with a thud. He had to get moving anyway if he wanted to get the vault locked up before sunrise. He rose from the bed and had begun gathering together his equipment when a fragment of memory trickled through his brain.

There was something else that Porozan had said that first, fateful night. Something not on the list. When Alcar finally remembered it, he frowned. It wasn't much to work with, but it was all he had.

This time, there was no smile on the thief's face as he laid his plans—just desperate hope. That his new scheme would start, as his previous, unsuccessful one had—with a nocturnal visit to Porozan's room left Alcar with a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*.

BY THE TIME ALCAR GOT BACK UP TO Porozan's room the next morning to retrieve the breakfast dishes, the wizard was up and dressed, his wand and key ring hanging from their accustomed places on his belt. The old mage yawned, then strode past Alcar and out of the room. The thief hurriedly scooped up the dirty dishes and scurried after his master.

The two of them walked along in silence for a few moments before Porozan paused and turned toward the thief, giving him an irritated look.

"Why do you dog my footsteps like that, man? The kitchen is down the other corridor."

"My apologies, Master. I was concerned that you might have some other tasks for me to perform."

The wizard's face took on a wary look. "You're unusually obsequious this morning," he noted, "What are you up to?"

Alcar gulped. If Porozan had framed the question as a command . . .

"Master, do you realize how degrading it is to be pulled willy-nilly by this damnable ring? If I can obey your commands quickly enough on my own, I can avoid its coercion and retain at least some semblance of dignity."

"You call this fawning dignified?" The mage laughed cruelly. "Very well, then. If nothing else, it should be entertaining to see how long you can keep it up."

They proceeded down the corridor once more, Porozan chuckling to himself and Alcar grinding his

teeth in a mixture of anger and anxiety. When they came even with the vault, Alcar stopped dead in his tracks.

"What's that?" he said.

Porozan, several paces ahead of him, stopped and looked back, a frown on his face.

"What's what?" he asked.

"That sound," Alcar replied. He held one hand up before the wizard could say anything more, then cocked his head toward the door of the vault as if listening to some faint sound.

"There seems to be something . . ." the thief whispered. He tried to take a step toward the vault but the ring immediately jerked him back. Alcar shrugged in resignation.

"What is it?" Porozan was whispering now.

"Probably nothing, Master. Just a rat perhaps—put it from your mind."

The wizard shook his head. "I think I'd better have a look," he said, pulling the wand from his belt. "Stand still." He raised the silver-tipped end and pointed it at the thief.

Alcar froze in place at the wizard's command and felt sudden panic course through his veins. "For how long?" he blurted out.

Porozan lowered the wand and scowled in annoyance. "It's just for a minute. Now stop sniveling, you worthless cretin!" He raised the wand once more.

"Shala-gora!" The hallway was briefly filled with tinny echoes of the keyword, then fell silent but for the breathing of the two men.

Alcar shuddered inwardly. If Porozan had left his command at a simple, "Stand still," the thief might have remained frozen in place until they both died of hunger.

One minute later, the command timed out, and Alcar found himself free to move once more. He stepped over to the motionless form of Porozan, the wizard's lips still parted in the act of uttering the last syllable of the wand's keyword.

Alcar tugged the wand from the mage's extended hand and observed its freshly painted tip. A few flakes of silver had come free, exposing the dark wood below, but the paint job had lasted long enough to accomplish its purpose.

Being careful not to touch Porozan's flesh, Alcar slowly worked the band of gold from the wizard's middle finger.

"You commanded me never to remove my ring," the thief told the statue before him. "But you said nothing about my removing yours." With that, he pocketed the ring and departed, leaving his erstwhile captor to gaze on in helpless rage.

MEDREA LAUGHED UNCONTROLLABLY. "YOU mean," she gasped between bursts of merriment, "that he froze himself with his own wand?"

"Yep," Alcar replied, taking a sip of his ale. "It was a close thing, though. I didn't think the paint on that wand was ever going to dry!"

The other thief controlled her laughter long enough to down the remainder of her drink. "But how come you were able to take his ring from him?" she asked.

"Easy," Alcar said as he refilled both their mugs from the pitcher that the server had left behind. "Porozan's commandments forbade me from touching his person. But I could still touch his ring, just so long as I didn't touch him."

"No, no. I understand all that," Medrea reassured him. "But how come you were able to take your own ring off afterward?"

"Once I had the ring off Porozan's finger, the geas was broken and I was free to do as I pleased."

"Exactly my point!" the woman exclaimed, her mental faculties surprisingly intact considering the amount of alcohol both had consumed over the last hour. "Surely you must have known that you'd be taking off your ring the moment you'd relieved him of his."

"Uh-huh," Alcar agreed. He could see what she was leading up to, and was enjoying her obvious confusion.

"Well then, that would constitute a violation of Porozan's commands. So why did the ring let you go through with it?" she asked. "Sneaking into his room, repainting his wand—any of it?"

"Because it wasn't really a violation of his commands," he explained.

"What?"

Alcar smiled. "On my first night, Porozan told me that I would have to obey his commands so long as he wore the master ring. That in itself acted as a sort of modifier to all his other commands. It meant that I could do whatever I wanted to, carry out whatever plans I desired, and the ring would not interfere. Just so long as any intended violations would not occur while Porozan was still wearing the master ring."

"Holy Dara!" Medrea muttered, shaking her head in mock disgust. "You're no thief—you're a lawyer!"

Now it was Alcar's turn to laugh. Medrea took another gulp of ale and used the back of her sleeve to wipe the foam from her lips. "So what did you do with him?" she inquired.

"Who, Porozan?"

The woman nodded.

"What could I do?" he asked her, spreading his hands out helplessly before him, palms up. "I don't know how to break a wizard's spells."

"You could have dragged him into that special vault of his," she pointed out. "That would probably have dispelled the wand's effects."

"I suppose so," Alcar admitted, "but who knows for sure? It can get dangerous, messing around with magic you know nothing about."

"So you just left him frozen there?" Medrea asked in surprise.

"Oh heavens, no! That would be cruel. What sort of person do you take me for?" His features took on a look of injured innocence.

Medrea rolled her eyes in exasperation. "All right then, so what did you do with him?"

"Well, I figured that it was a matter best handled by another wizard." Alcar smiled as he lifted his mug to his lips. "So I asked Gillamon to look in on him and see what he could do."

Medrea's howls of laughter filled the tavern once more. ■



Planescape

Chronicle of The Plain of Shale

Chris Avellone (story), Eric Campanella (art)

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The Plain of Shale expedition was an experiment, my superiors informed me. The Consortium had been contacted by the Pabulum, a wizard school that hails from the ninth ring. Many of its mages are members of the Takers, but the Takers appear to have distanced themselves from the school in the past century, claiming that its obsession with magic was beginning to run contrary to the beliefs of the faction.

The Pabulum mages were interested in hiring guides to help them gather spell components from the creatures on the Plain of Shale. The school was willing to pay to have the Consortium arrange the expedition—a sum so exorbitant that it attracted Estavan's attention.

“It means they tried it at least once before and made a bloody mess of it,” Estavan told me. But then he raised his finger and smiled, displaying his full row of fangs. “Yet they try again, Kaye. And that is what interests me.”

He instructed me to go with them as a chronicler, and though the Pabulum balked at this, Estavan had been persuasive enough to dispel their objections... as he had dispelled mine.

And so it was that morning found us on the Plain of Shale. The arrival was without great fanfare—it was a half-score of wizards, a few servants (minor mages from the school), an archer, and a bariaur scout with a single horn and a crooked neck.

First morning, Plain of Shale

Kaye, chronicler



Bentneck, the bariaur with the twisted neck, had become bored quickly. It appeared there was not much for a scout to do on the outskirts of the plains. Not being able to strike up a conversation with the somber Pabulum mages, he eventually turned to me. We exchanged a few words, and then Bentneck began to ramble, though seemingly more to hear himself speak than anything else. His voice was loud and booming enough that I could hear him easily over the crunch of his hooves on the brittle rock beneath us.

“Hai, out on the land, things can be different, lass.” Bentneck’s teeth were abnormally large for his mouth, although this seemed convenient enough, as he had a habit of chewing on his lower lip and beard. “And here, you have to keep your wits about you, you do.”

I didn’t think it was prudent to point out that he didn’t appear to be paying much attention to the surroundings at all. I was more interested in studying him. He looked as though he had been the victim of many battles. One of his ram’s horns had been snapped, and he wore it as a drinking horn on his harness. The stump of the horn had been carefully filed, and charcoal dust had been smeared onto his

hide, evidently in preparation for this expedition.

The bariaur's black leather vest and harness were covered with all sorts of weapons, from a quiver of huge metal spears, to a curved club... and a strange shield that looked to be the carapace of some creature. His neck was twisted oddly to one side, at such an angle that it always seemed he was listening to something. He caught me staring at his neck, and he smiled.

"A youth's folly, sweetling," he chuckled. "I matched wits with a gronk. He won the contest, but I was the one made the wiser."

THE PLAIN OF SHALE

The Plain of Shale lies on the ninth ring of the Outlands, though its exact location changes once every few seasons. When the weather turns cold or windy, great rolling mists descend from the Hinterlands to swallow the plain—at which point it appears elsewhere. Its shifting locale has caused many planar scholars to speculate that the plain's original home must have been near the gate town of Xaos, but they cannot explain why the plain continues to move even after distancing itself from that site.

Other scholars have offered differing theories, including claims that the Outlands considers the Plain of Shale an 'irritation,' like a scab or an itch it can't scratch. As such, it keeps ripping the plain off the land to get rid of it, but the itch always reappears where a new scab forms. And at least one yugoloth scholar has claimed that the plain moves simply because it is searching for something.

The Plain of Shale consists of leagues of square, brittle rock. The entire area is bleached of color, with blacks and grays dominating. An ashen mist rolls across it, thick enough that it is difficult to see the block canyons and mountains that surround the area. These mists also blanket the skies, cloaking the plain in its own shroud. Canyons and fissures riddle the place, surrounded by patches of weak rock that can send an unwary party plunging miles into the earth, to be dashed against the bottom.

The plain is often the site of hunting expeditions sponsored by the Planar Trade Consortium and various mage schools. Many beasts inhabiting the Plain of Shale are valued for the spell components that

can be taken from them, or are captured to serve as living weapons in conflicts across the planes. These expeditions frequently hire bariaur scouts from one of the many nomad tribes that roam the Outlands, as these tribes are known to make pilgrimages to the plain as part of their rites of passage.

We made poor time over the Plain of Shale on foot, and Xachariah (the archer) and Bentneck appeared irritated at the mages' slow, plodding pace. The Pabulum mages stopped every league or so, meditated, then talked in hushed tones among themselves. It seemed as though they were sighting, but how they could do so through the mists was a mystery to me.

Xachariah muttered at this, and he exchanged glances with Bentneck. When we finally camped for the night, the mages went off to one of the ridges and began to point across the landscape. A few of the wizardlings tended the fires and saw to the completion of the camp, setting alarms and sending whispering, invisible servants to unpack the supplies. There was a brief argument between Xachariah and the servant-mages over the fire—Xachariah demanded a natural fire be lit instead of the curtain of light spells and heat spheres the servants wished to conjure up. The servants eventually conceded, but Xachariah was clearly irritated that he had been forced to argue the point at all.

Bentneck went on a brief circuit of the perimeter, then clattered up to the campfire, coming to a stop by the archer. They began to talk, keeping their voices low to avoid being overheard by the mages. I lay awake in my bedroll and watched the two of them; I had to strain my ears to hear their conversation, but their expressions were plain to see.

"These Pabulum." Xachariah shook his head and spat in the dust. "An ill-omened name, don't ye think?"

"Eh? The Pab... u... Pab-uh-lum? What's that mean?" Bentneck's confusion was written on his features. His eyes narrowed at Xachariah, as if trying to decide whether the archer was trying to make him feel foolish. "I thought these Pab-u-lum, they were just one of those spell schools, like the weavers or the shade mages?"

"It is a spell school. The name also means food," Xachariah replied

with a snort.

His disdain was a little too loud, and his voice carried. One of the younger mages tending the fire overheard him and stood up indignantly. He was one of the servants who had argued with Xachariah over the fire in the first place, and he still looked angry about it. “You are in error... sir.” He strode toward Xachariah, who didn’t bother turning. “The ‘Pabulum’ refers to our founding motto of intellectual nourishment. The archaic definition you speak of does not pertain to... “

“Aye, well to me, being an ar-kay-ick fool ‘n’ all, it means food.” Xachariah’s voice fell like a hatchet. “And if I were ye, I’d rattle yer bone box less on this expedition, ‘n’ try and think about what yer precious motto could mean.” He didn’t even meet the servant’s gaze.

Bentneck smiled, pleased that someone else had been made the fool. The bariaur’s hands fell to the curve of his club. The mage’s eyes flashed, but he made no further comment. After a moment of silence, he turned and went back to feeding the fire.



GRONK

Bentneck awoke me at nightfall and said we were moving out. There was the distant crashing of thunder, though the skies had been clear before we made camp. I had been used to the shifting weather on the Outlands, so I thought little of it... until I realized I saw no flashes of lightning, and the darkened sky held no clouds. I asked Bentneck what the sound was.

“Hai,” Bentneck hissed. “What you hear, sweetling, is the sound of gronk love.” He chuckled to himself as he rose to wake the rest of the expedition.



Perhaps the darkness had something to do with it, but the first sighting of the gronk was not nearly as inspiring as I’d thought it would be.

I had heard the Pabulum mages speak of them in detail, even

reverently, but the gronk struck me as rather ill-brained beasts. I whispered as much to Bentneck, who was watching the herd milling below us with a stone-faced expression.

The bariaur nodded at my whisper. “Hai, those stone frogs seem addled, don’t they?” He adjusted his belt, feeling for his spears. “Don’t worry about whispering, lass. Those hopping stones can’t hear us. Near deaf, they are.” He looked at me for a moment, then nodded back to the gronk. “What do you think of their young?”

I studied the herd. No young to be seen.

“I don’t see any,” I replied. I thought Bentneck might have better sight than me.

“Of course you don’t, kit,” Bentneck chuckled. “You’re standing on them. Damned rude of you.”

I looked down and saw only the Plain of Shale beneath me... there was dirt and some pebbles scattered across its surface. But before I could ask him for an explanation, Bentneck shook his head. “I’ll spill the dark later, lass.” The mages motioned for him, and he clattered up to them, readying his spear.



The slaying of the gronk herd was a minor thing. Under Xachariah’s direction, a few of the lesser wizards called forth a show of dancing lights, and the gronk went mad, smashing into each other until all the herd lay dead on the plain below. It was a sickening sight, but the mages, along with Xachariah and Bentneck, seemed pleased—they were laughing and congratulating each other.

After the carnage, I walked among the gronk bodies, following slightly behind Bentneck. The gronk were huge. “Those headplates look as though they could snap a giant’s shin,” I remarked.

Bentneck snorted. “Hai, but those spikes are not just for bashing some berk, they’re not.” He tapped a gronk’s cracked headplate with a hoof, then lifted it up with one hand, showing me the spikes on its surface. “You see the ridges? ‘Buds,’ the graybeards call them. When the gronk smash their heads together ...” He smashed his bracers together with a clang, making me wince. “The buds on this gronk

touch the buds of that gronk, and fall to the ground if they knocked their heads hard enough.” He nodded at the shale beneath us, which was flecked with pebbles. “Any of these things might be a tiny gronk, see?” He laughed and it sounded like an avalanche. “Pebbles now... gronk beasts later, hai?”

I couldn’t tell if Bentneck spoke in jest or not. When he saw my confusion, he laughed again, louder this time.

“Relax, lass ... only mages are without humor, they are.”

Gronk

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any land

FREQUENCY: Uncommon

ORGANIZATION: Solitary or Herd (see below)

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Day

DIET: Unknown (see below)

INTELLIGENCE: Animal (1)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral

APPEARING: 1 or 2–12 (see below)

ARMOR CLASS: 6

MOVEMENT: 12 (Charge 18)

HIT DICE: 4+2

THAC0: 17

ATTACKS: 1

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 2–12

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Charge

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Half damage from blunt weapons, sound-based attacks

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: L (6' tall)

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 270

Huge, squat beasts with powerful legs and a thundering croak, the gronk are also known as “hopping rocks” or “stone frogs.” The ill-tempered beasts pose a threat to the nomadic bariaur tribes that roam the Outlands, and the bariaur tribes occasionally mount hunting parties solely to thin the gronk’s numbers.

According to the bariaur nomads, gronk have existed on the Outlands for as far back as five bariaur generations. Their numbers have not increased substantially during that time, mostly due to bariaur thinning gronk herds with their rites of passage. A number of planewalkers have sighted the gronk on several Prime worlds as well.

Combat: The gronk aren’t subtle attackers. When a creature comes within their line of sight, they emit thundering croaks and hop toward the target, then smash it to death with their spiked headplates. The gronk can perform a hopping-charge up to 180 feet, striking for 2–16 points of damage.

All gronk are nearly deaf. They gain a +4 bonus to saving throws vs. any sound-based attack or spell. (If the saving throw fails, they suffer only half damage from the attack.) Bright visual displays irritate gronk. Wizards have been known to cast dancing lights or pyrotechnics spells into gronk herds to drive them into a frenzy. This results in the gronk turning on themselves until nearly every member of the herd is dead.

Habitat/Society: The gronk are so ill tempered they can’t even tolerate their own species. Despite their herd mentality, the strength of the herd depends on the gronk’s emotional cycle; members of a new herd can survive for a week at most before becoming irritated with one another. Soon after, their natural hatred gives way to furious

bouts of head smashing. The herd then dissolves and reforms into new herds several months later. As a result, the gronk can be encountered singly or in groups, depending on their “hate cycle.”

Gronk herds have been found in deserts, plains, mountains, and swamps, and in almost any climate. They shun any terrain near a large body of water, such as an ocean or lake.

Ecology: Ironically, the gronk’s hatred of each other propagates their species. The gronk’s reproductive organs are located near their brains, in the spiked carapace over their foreheads. The ridged spikes that cover the gronk’s headplate are actually “buds.” When smashed together with sufficient force, the buds are transferred between carapaces, and a new bud grows on the headplate within a few days. This new ridge either falls off or is knocked off when the gronk smashes its forehead into another creature. If this ridge touches dirt, sand, earth, or rock, it submerges a few inches beneath the ground, only to burrow forth a few months later as a tiny gronk.

The gronk have never been seen to eat; it is a mystery how they sustain themselves. A gronk’s lifespan ranges from three to five years. As a gronk ages, its headplate cracks and flakes off until the creature suffers brain failure and dies.

Gronk headplates are often sought after as shields and armor plating. Gronk shields provide a –1 bonus to AC against all crushing attacks (in addition to the normal shield bonus), but they weigh over 50 pounds. Characters with less than a 15 Strength suffer a –1 penalty to all Dexterity checks and attack rolls when using the shields in combat.

Gronk headplates have also been used as a covering for siege towers and for shield walls. One bariaur myth claims gronk headplates were once placed upon an enchanted battering ram. This ram was said to act as a horn of blasting upon any structure, but it was so heavy it needed twice the number of people to carry it as a normal battering ram.

The gronk have bladder-like glands along their necks and upper backs. If a gronk is skinned with care, a hunter can remove these glands intact. When treated with the right resins and filled with acid, the gland sacs can be used as grenades. These bladder bombs are

extremely effective against fiends, and Blood War patrols occasionally capture herds of gronk, keeping them in pens in the Lower Planes to be harvested for their glands.



GRILLIG

It was fortunate, Bentneck told us several times later around the campfire, that he had stopped Xachariah's arrow before it left his bow. The bariaur, deep into his cups, went as far as to claim that he had saved us all from the archer's foolishness. Xachariah bore the stings in stride, letting the bariaur have his moment.

Xachariah had spotted the first grillig earlier that day—he had never seen one before, and was eager to add it to his list of kills. Bentneck arrived and caught his arm just as he was sighting on the creature, and as Xachariah's face flushed in anger, the bariaur shook his head slightly, warning him to be silent.

Bentneck then reached for one of the iron spears at his side and drew it from its quiver. To my surprise, the spearhead did not have a sharpened edge, but was a sphere of black iron almost half a foot in diameter. It looked as though it weighed twenty or thirty pounds, but Bentneck hefted it easily. He sighted on the scuttling creature in the valley below. "Heed this, friend," he said to Xachariah.

He then hurled the spear with all his might, and it smashed square into the creature's spine, snapping it. The creature floundered for a moment, making strange hissing giggles before falling still.

"Heed this, ye glory-hoardin' goat!" Xachariah replied angrily. "My arrow would have flown true."

Bentneck clapped him on the back, chuckling. "You don't hunt grilligs with any angled weapon, my archer friend." His reply was slow, as if to a child. Xachariah went livid. "Edges simply pass right through them." Bentneck turned his attention back to the landscape. "You only woulda' startled him and made him scatter. My way keeps him from bringing others."



"But what are these grilligs?" I asked the bariaur later, when

Xachariah's anger had cooled.

"Foul pests and a nasty bunch of bleeders," he grumbled in reply. "Can nearly murder anyone not watching themselves. I seen them bring down a herd of gronk, I have, giggling and chattering amongst themselves. Killing for them's like a bunch of us going to see mummers at the fair."

"Where do they come from?" The idea of a creature immune to the sweep of a blade fascinated me. I had become acutely aware of all angles after hearing Bentneck tell of the grillig's strange defense against edges. Sharp rocks, the knives some of the servant mages wore—so many weapons were edged. Except, that is, for the ones Bentneck was carrying. Now I knew why.

"From where do the grilligs come?" Bentneck chuckled, then gnashed his teeth together. "I don't know, lass, but I wish they'd miracle themselves back."

"So you really don't know?" I prompted. It seemed as though Bentneck was holding back. But it was Xachariah who finally spoke, with a wry smile and a wink at Bentneck.

"Ah ... I heard there was once a yugoloth who spat into a piece of paper, folded it up, then sent it to one of his kin. There was a secret to this foldin', there was, and perhaps some sorceries in the paper itself. For when it was folded once too many times, then unfolded again—poof! A grillig popped forth! It looked around, saw it was on the Outlands, then looked for a place to set up its kip." Xachariah wagged his finger at me, smiling. "Let this be a lesson for ye, lass—be wary of books and papers and things that can be folded."

Before I could respond to his jest, the servant mage Xachariah had bickered with before interrupted. He had been sitting by the fire, listening to Xachariah's tale.

"Actually, one of those same books you shun tells a different tale," the mage intoned. Xachariah bristled but kept silent. "It states that the grilligs were created by the Fosterer to bring down the Lady of Pain. Just think—" But next to me, Bentneck gave an angry rumble at the Lady's name. Xachariah made a semicircle over his heart. "You have to admit," the mage continued, louder this time, "that it is a far more

plausible—”

“Ye’d do well to keep yer tongue from spittin’ such nonsense,” said Xachariah. “Or I’ll be keepin’ it for ye.”

The mage shifted away. An uncomfortable silence followed, which Bentneck finally broke with a snort.

“Grillig’re like rats,” he said, speaking only to me and Xachariah. “Pests. They’re a giant’s version of rats. Another blessing the Fosterer left us, he did.”

“Who is the Fosterer?” I asked.

“Don’t you know the Fosterer?” Bentneck seemed surprised. “I thought everyone had heard of that blighter.”

“It was before my day of naming,” I replied. “Who is he?”

“Who was he, more like.” Bentneck chuckled. “Usedta’ be lord of this whole plain, he was... when it was the Bladegrave, I mean, before it was the Plain of Shale.” He shook his head. “He bred the gronk and the grilligs as living weapons... don’t think he created them, but he used ’em.” He shrugged. “In the end, the Plain of Shale was all that was left.” He glanced at the terrain. “A powerful sorcerer, he was.”

“He was mad,” Xachariah added, his voice cold.

“I said he was a sorcerer, didn’t I?” Bentneck exclaimed. He turned to me. “Being addle-coved just comes with the territory for those cackling sods.”

Xachariah and Bentneck then broke into an argument, with names like Tenser and Mordenkainen tossed between them. They argued deep into the night, and I fell asleep to the sound of their bickering.

Grillig

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any angled terrain

FREQUENCY: Uncommon

ORGANIZATION: Herd

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Any

DIET: Carnivore

INTELLIGENCE: Semi (2–4)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral evil

APPEARING: 1 or 2–12

ARMOR CLASS: 8

MOVEMENT: 12

HIT DICE: 2+1

THAC0: 19

ATTACKS: 4

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 1–3/1–3/1–3/1–3/

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Nil

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Immune to edged weapons

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: M (4'–5' tall)

MORALE: Fearless (19–20) or Unreliable (2–4)

XP VALUE: 175

Grilligs are small, scaled beasts with long arms and hunched legs. Their movement resembles a gorilla's, as the grillig uses its arms to propel itself along. All four of a grillig's limbs end in three talons, which are considered valuable spell components (see below). Grilligs are vicious pests and can be lethal if they encounter an expedition unprepared for them.

Legend has it that grilligs were born from two-dimensional angles; but whatever their origin, they cannot be hurt by any edged weapon.

Arrows, spears, swords, and other such weapons pass through a grillig harmlessly.

Grilligs can be found in almost any rugged, angular terrain. Chasms, caves, and mountainous areas have been known to run thick with them.

Combat: Grilligs prefer to weaken a target with ambushes and traps, then attack in groups until their prey is dead. In battle, they raise themselves on their forelimbs, then lash out with their foot talons, shredding targets with lightning speed.

Grilligs always gang up on victims. If all except one of the grilligs attacking a target is killed, the remaining grillig will either immediately flee combat or join another group of grilligs attacking another victim. If cornered before it can flee, the grillig hisses and gnashes its teeth, but it does not defend itself from attackers.

Habitat/Society: The bariaur call grilligs “pests that hunt their hunters.” They have a pack mentality, and their society revolves around finding something larger and meaner than themselves, killing it, then moving onto a larger, meaner creature. If they can’t find one, they will settle for lesser prey.

Usually, a grillig is encountered singly, scouting for a victim. If it finds one, it flees and gathers the others of its pack, which then stalk the target. They soften their prey with ambushes or crude traps (pushing boulders off ledges, causing avalanches, stampeding other creatures over the victim, and so on). When it comes to these ambushes, grilligs display cunning equal to an average human. There is evidence to suggest that these creatures simply live to hunt, favoring that over their own survival.

Although grilligs send out lone scouts in search of victims, they never attack or kill alone—there is always more than one present. Some sages speculate that this might have something to do with a need to have superior numbers, but certain yugoloth scholars have scoffed at this, claiming it’s because “it takes more than one point to make an angle.”

Ecology: It is not known how grilligs breed—more simply seem to appear when their numbers become too thin. The bariaur root out

these pests wherever they find them, but no matter how many they kill, more appear in later seasons. If actively hunted, the grilligs lie low for a while, then emerge when the hunters relax their guard.

Grilligs are the reason why bariaur tribes on the Outlands carry bludgeoning weapons. Local myths claim that grilligs can appear through sharp angles in buildings or terrain, but this has never been confirmed.

Mages are always seeking ways to skin grilligs and use their hides as proof against angled attacks. The protection is thought to be in the grilligs' nature rather than in their physiology, for no one has succeeded in preserving a grillig's hide after death. When a grillig dies, its lizard-like skin becomes brittle, eventually turning to dust. If a way to preserve a grillig's hide could be found, they would become the most popular prey in the Planes.

A grillig's teeth and talons are often used as spell components when enchanting magical armor, and they have even been used as arrowheads and spearheads for magical weapons. It is said that there are rituals for giving certain weapons the "speed of a grillig," allowing the wielder of the weapon to attack multiple times in a round. Perhaps their most popular use is as a spell component for the *shield* spell. When a grillig's tooth or talon is added to the casting (add 1 segment to the casting time), the spell gives the caster an additional -1 bonus to AC vs. edged attacks. Some mages wear necklaces of grillig teeth for just such occasions.



SOHMIEN

"The sohmien were sired by nightmares," Bentneck said. Whatever was in his drinking horn this night had loosened his tongue again, and his words were stronger and steadier than before. "They're revenge, they are. Revenge made flesh. They rose from the blood of one of the nightmare lords, and they come now to all those who seek revenge and bind themselves to them."

"Nightmare lords?" I echoed. I had never heard of any such thing.

Bentneck nodded. "Hai, lords. They used to rule the nightmares, and the fiends would have to barter with them to use the steeds."

Bentneck squinted at me. “Have you ever heard of the Gloom Meet, kit? That’s when all the fiends gather to speak to the others. Them nightmares ride the skies to gather the fiends to this meeting, they do.”

“But once...” Bentneck smiled. “Once, the fiends called a Gloom Meet that was only for the purpose of killing. They lured the last of the nightmare lords there to kill him. An old ‘mare, he was, and powerful. But them fiends... they were tired of dealing with him for the use of his children, they were.”

Bentneck took another swig from his horn. “They called him to the meet, and the fiends set upon him. They tried to put him in the dead-book with every trick they could. They scattered the soil with caltrops covered with the foulest poisons in the hells, hurled barbed cold-iron spears a league’s length into him, and when he tried to take to the air to escape, they turned the sky alight with magic, blinding his eyes white. They struck at him with everything in their hateful arsenal, but still he lived. He looked like one of them quills near the end of his flight. They hounded him to the edge of the Hinterlands, firing curses and spears into him until he staggered into the mists—and died there, as the tale goes.”

Bentneck lowered his voice, trying to frighten me. “It’s said when the old lord stumbled into the mists of the Hinterlands, his dark blood left a blistering trail behind him. And where his blood fell? The Outland itself cried out, wailing like a banshee, uttering the cries the nightmare lord would not.” Bentneck took another swig and wiped his chin.

“Then, three years later, the sohmien rode from the Hinterlands. Answering the Fosterer’s call.” The bariaur’s eyes seemed unfocused, staring at the horizon. Then he blinked and shook his head.

“Hai!” he snorted, clattering his hooves against the ground. Then he spat onto the earth. “A foul breed. The Planes are a darker place for their presence.”



“We need to pick up the pace if we’re going to catch them hell-horses,” Xachariah said to the Pabulum’s leaders on the following

night. “At this rate, ye’ll see nothin’ of them, ye will. Luck has it, I’ve seen tracks that lead to the nor—”

“You have been hired to guide, not dictate,” the Pabulum graybeard said sharply. “If you find this to be beyond your ability, then—”

“Aye, ye hired me to guide ye to yer precious spell components and other bits and skins ye want off these creatures,” Xachariah snapped. “Aye? And that’s why ye’re stoppin’ every five steps, mumblin’ amongst yerselves, is it?”

The Pabulum leader became silent. Every mage around the campsite suddenly stopped and turned toward Xachariah. The act in itself was not threatening— but the fact that they had all done so in unison was.

The smile left Bentneck’s face. Xachariah went still, but his eyes narrowed.

“What ye’re here for don’t matter ta me,” the archer said finally, lowering his voice in disgust. “I’ll guide ye, but be square with me...” Xachariah smiled coldly, almost fiend-like. ” ‘Cause if ye’re lookin’ for the Fosterer’s remains, I can help ye, I can. Yer lookin’ for his old home, aye? Where he died... and what he left behind, aye?”

It was as though Xachariah had lit two flames in the mage’s eyes. The Pabulum graybeard rose from his seat. “Are these things known to you?”

Xachariah nodded. “I’ll guide ye there on the morrow, I will.” He nodded at the bedrolls. “We can’t travel there tonight, so get yer rest. We’ll speak more in the morn.”

The Pabulum mages did not reply. They simply followed Xachariah with their eyes as he turned and walked out of the campfire’s light.

Sohmien (SOH-ME-IN)

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Plains/Hinterlands

FREQUENCY: Varies (see below)

ORGANIZATION: Herd

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Nocturnal

DIET: Special

INTELLIGENCE: Animal (1)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Chaotic evil

APPEARING: Varies

ARMOR CLASS: 8

MOVEMENT: 15

HIT DICE: 2+1

THAC0: 18

ATTACKS: 1 bite/2 hooves/1 gore/1 spine

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 1–6/1–6/1–6/1–8/1–8

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Spines, fear stampede

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Nil

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: M

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 270

Sohmien resemble huge horses with leathery, ashen hides and dead white eyes. They leave trails of mist in their wake, resembling that which shrouds the Hinterlands. The touch of their hooves kills vegetation and taints the land for years.

A sohmien's shoulder blades extend beyond its head and neck, and three bone spikes (extensions of its spinal column) sprout from each shoulder.

These creatures are said to have been born from the fall of the last of the nightmare lords. According to legend, this nightmare lord was lured to the Gloom Meet by his subjects, then attacked by fiends who had tired of bartering for permission to use his steeds. The nightmare lord was driven into the Hinterlands, his body riddled by cold iron spears and arrows. It is believed that where his blood struck the earth, sohmien sprang forth.

Sohmien hate nightmares and attack them over all other targets. It is said the ride of the sohmien will not end until they kill every nightmare in existence.

Combat: Sohmien prefer to attack with the spines that project from their shoulder blades. Three spines sprout from each shoulder; the top two primary spines can be fired at an opponent for 1–8 points of damage each. Sohmien spines make a horrible whistling noise when fired, and shriek when they taste blood. The spines are treated as +1 enchanted weapons, inflict double damage against nightmares, and regrow in 2d4 days.

After firing both primary spines, a sohmien gores with its secondary spines. The sohmien prefer to aim for nonvital areas, allowing a creature to experience as much pain as possible before closing in for the kill.

A sohmien's secondary spines extend a foot past its head, impaling a target for 1–8 points of damage. On a natural 20, the spines have gored the opponent so deeply that the sohmien can also bite the target for 1–6 points of damage. Sohmien have been known to bite and trample targets with their hooves for 1–6 points of damage each, but this is rare.

The stampede of the sohmien inspires fear in any creature with fewer than 2 HD, forcing a Morale check. Nic'Epona, bariaur, and horses receive a +4 bonus to their Morale checks. The sohmien can only stampede at dusk, and only at the request of someone who has invoked them (see below).

Habitat/Society: According to myth, sohmien are creatures of vengeance. They can be summoned by any vengeful mage or priest of sufficient power through a ritual called the sohmien pact (a spell believed lost long ago).

When summoned, sohmien must be ordered to ride, destroying all in the path leading to the creature that has wronged the summoner. The ride ends only when the sohmien are slain or when they have reduced the offending creature to near-death (1 hit point). At that point, the sohmien wait, pawing the ground. If their victim desires revenge for the attack, the sohmien can be sent stampeding back to the summoner. What happens when the sohmien return is unknown, but chronicles state that the summoner vanishes forever. Myths claim the summoner's voice joins the frightful wails that follow the sohmien as they ride from the Hinterlands.

No one has ever successfully used a sohmien as a mount.

Ecology: Sohmien do not eat, sleep, or mate; their rides are governed by some cycle that eludes scholars, for herds of them emerge from the Hinterlands randomly, then return. It is likely they appear only when a creature craves vengeance.

The spines of the sohmien are useful for harming, binding, or (in some circumstances) summoning nightmares. They can also be used to make arrows of slaying nightmares and for strengthening enchantments in weapons of vengeance. Usually the spine is ground to powder and applied to the weapon.

A sohmien's spines turn to vapor within three days of being taken from the corpse.



TRELON

Bentneck woke me in the night, and as I was about to ask him if we were moving out, he clamped his hand over my mouth. His eyes were wide, and he chewed at his lower lip. He motioned for me to follow, but as I reached for my supplies, he shook his head. We moved as quickly and silently from the campsite as we could.

Someone had let the fire die, but I saw the unmoving shapes of the Pabulum mages still sleeping around the site. There was no guard.

Moments later, we joined Xachariah, who was clutching a torch. He fixed me with a stare. "We're givin' this place the laugh," he whispered. "Are ye with us?"

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Xachariah looked more anxious than I’d ever seen him before. Bentneck wasn’t even paying attention to the two of us—he was clutching one of his iron spears in his hands and studying the darkness around him.

“I didn’t know the dark of it till this night. Do ye know what those addled mages are lookin’ for?” Xachariah hissed. “Do ye? They’re lookin’ for the Fosterer, they are. Where he fell. They’re hell-bent on trying to dig up his lost works.” When Xachariah spat, it struck the shale beneath our feet and made a strange ringing sound. “They’ll find it, they will, and that’s why we haveta’ make haste.”

“If it’s here, why—”

“Those deaders up there don’t know. I do.” Xachariah frowned as he glanced at the darkness around him, then back to me. “Every beast ye’ve seen here is one of the Fosterer’s lost works ...”

“Dead?” I replied—because I hadn’t heard much beyond ‘deaders.’ “They’re dead?”

“They will be,” Xachariah hissed. “Those fools never thought to ask why they had to shell out a lifetime’s jink and glitter for us to guide a group of spell-slingers to this plain. They jest thought we were hard dealers.” He snarled, his eyes gleaming. “They don’t know what the shadows hold here, but they’ll soon know the dark of it, they will.”

“But ... we can’t just ...”

“We can, and we will.” Xachariah shook his head. “Those fool mages said they needed guides to hunt the monsters that filled this plain, and we agreed. They said naught about dredgin’ up the Fosterer’s old knowledge—and that, I will have nothin’ to do with. A blight he was, and nothing good ever came from what was in that sod’s brain-box. It deserves to lie in the dead-book with him.” Xachariah nodded at the darkness. “He’s to blame for breedin’ the critters you see here, and for cursin’ this plain so nothin’ grows here ‘cept monsters.”

He glanced up at the campsite. I saw the shadows stirring, and a faint clicking noise began to grow. I suddenly realized why Xachariah had

argued with the servants about the fire on the first night we made camp. But a dead fire was no proof against the creatures that began to appear.

“They want the Fosterer’s treasures, do they?” Xachariah snarled, gripping his torch tightly. “Look. They come for them now.”



Xachariah told me of the trelons later that night, when we were leagues from the campsite that had become the Pabulum mages’ graveyard.

“They hate mages,” he said. “In a gronk-mean kind of way. They’ll kill an archmage in his sleep, they will, and there’s only a few things that’s proof against a trelon. One is natural light—not some light sorcery, but a good burning fire or lamp. Light sorceries just make them swarm.” Xachariah looked at Bentneck. “Some of the others are cold steel and the courage to stand yer ground before they slice ye in two.”

As we walked, intent on leaving the unseen horror of the campsite behind us, the archer was thoughtful. “They’re insects, near as I can figure. They drift in and out of shadows, and none can really make them out until they show themselves. Ye can always kind of hear ’em if ye know they’re there... it’s like a faint clickin’. The tale goes that the Fosterer first found them on some Prime world, gathered ’em up, then dumped them into the Academy of Weavers in the fifth ring. The trelons frenzied, slaughtered the whole school. Not one mage survived.”

In response to my horrified reaction, Xachariah frowned. But he finished his tale.

“Beasts beget beasts, though. And in the end? Evil feeds on itself. The dark of the matter is, he couldn’t find the trelons once they were done ... they’d just seemed to have vanished. He thought no more about it. Until the night they came for him—and that’s where the story of the Fosterer ends.”

Trelon

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any shadowy area

FREQUENCY: Rare

ORGANIZATION: Hive

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Nocturnal

DIET: Mages

INTELLIGENCE: Low (7)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral evil

APPEARING: 1–3/mage

ARMOR CLASS: 2

MOVEMENT: 12

HIT DICE: 3+1

THAC0: 17

ATTACKS: 2

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 2–7/2–7

SPECIAL ATTACKS: –3 penalty to opponents' surprise

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Immune to illusions, phantasms, and shadow magic

MAGIC RESISTANCE: 35%

SIZE: L

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 420

Trelons originated on one of the Prime worlds and were brought to the Outlands by a sorcerer living on the ninth ring. This sorcerer used them as weapons, transporting them into the Academy of Weavers near Curst, where the trelons murdered the entire school of

illusionists in their sleep.

Trelons have been described as a “mixture of orange and shadow.” They have two long arms that end in curved spikes, two mandibles near the mouth for feeding, and two spindly legs. According to legend, trelons were created to exterminate mages on some long-dead Prime world. True or not, the trelons seem to hate mages and magic in general.

Trelons do not like natural light, and torches or strong lanterns can prevent a trelon from attacking its target. Light spells, however, drive them into a frenzy, and they attack any opponent using such magic without hesitation.

Combat: A trelon swarm is terrible to behold. When they appear, they mob any nearby creature, tearing through their victims like scythes. Trelons attack with their two arm spikes, which bisect a target like a pair of cutting shears. When a trelon has killed a target, the mandibles around its mouth scoop up the remains of its victim. Trelons do not stop to feed until they have killed every non-trelon in sight.

Trelons never appear at any distance greater than 30 feet from their victims. Until a victim comes within range, the trelons simply don’t exist. A target might never even know that it is in the middle of a swarm of trelons until they suddenly begin to materialize, imposing a –3 penalty to their prey’s surprise roll. Where these creatures come from is unknown, but they seem to appear only in shadowy conditions where there is no natural light. It is not known where they retreat to once they have finished their attack.

No one knows how these creatures hunt. Some believe that the trelons track a creature by its spellcasting, its shadow, its emotions, or its sound. It is known that trelons have the ability to track a victim through almost any spell or magical item designed to cloak the victim. They are drawn to invisibility, *dust of disappearance*, displacements, and shadow magic. Trelons can sense a target no matter how well it is hidden. It has been observed (under extremely bloody circumstances) that magical cloaking effects drive trelons into a rage, and they prefer to attack any invisible or cloaked target in range.

Trelons are immune to *hold monster*, *protection from evil*, illusions, shadow magic, and mind-influencing spells. They are the bane of illusionists, so much so that a trelon's claw is often a component used in the creation of arrows or other weapons designed to slay illusionists, shadows, or creatures from the Ethereal Plane.

Habitat/Society: Trelons speak in soft clicks and chittering noises, which rise to a near-deafening screeching when they strike. Their insect nature makes several sages suspect that they might have a hive mentality, but like much that is known about trelons, this is only speculation.

Ecology: Trelons seem to combine the worst characteristics of demons and insects. They appear to favor cool, shadowy places. The scent of magic or a wizard causes them to swarm.

Trelons are valued for their talons, which are long enough to be used as sword blades. When properly enchanted, they can become fearsome mage-slaying weapons. Tales have been told of how such weapons prefer to attack mages in combat, sometimes twisting in their owner's grip to stab at a magic-user, no matter the intended target. There are also rumors that trelons eventually come to reclaim the piece of their kin taken from them.

Trelon blood is said to give *arrows of slaying* (notably those that slay mages, illusionists, and shadows) extra abilities, but these abilities are unknown. Any attempt to use trelon blood to boost spellcasting or in magical rituals has caused the spell to fail—and has, in some circumstances, summoned a swarm of trelons to the scene.



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The Plain of Shale expedition was an experiment, my superiors informed me. The Consortium had been contacted by the Pabulum, a

wizard school that hails from the ninth ring. Many of its mages are members of the Takers, but the Takers appear to have distanced themselves from the school in the past century, claiming that its obsession with magic was beginning to run contrary to the beliefs of the faction.

The Pabulum mages were interested in hiring guides to help them gather spell components from the creatures on the Plain of Shale. The school was willing to pay to have the Consortium arrange the expedition—a sum so exorbitant that it attracted Estavan’s attention.

“It means they tried it at least once before and made a bloody mess of it,” Estavan told me. But then he raised his finger and smiled, displaying his full row of fangs. “Yet they try again, Kaye. And that is what interests me.”

He instructed me to go with them as a chronicler, and though the Pabulum balked at this, Estavan had been persuasive enough to dispel their objections... as he had dispelled mine.

And so it was that morning found us on the Plain of Shale. The arrival was without great fanfare—it was a half-score of wizards, a few servants (minor mages from the school), an archer, and a bariaur scout with a single horn and a crooked neck.

First morning, Plain of Shale **Kaye, chronicler**



Bentneck, the bariaur with the twisted neck, had become bored quickly. It appeared there was not much for a scout to do on the outskirts of the plains. Not being able to strike up a conversation with the somber Pabulum mages, he eventually turned to me. We exchanged a few words, and then Bentneck began to ramble, though seemingly more to hear himself speak than anything else. His voice was loud and booming enough that I could hear him easily over the crunch of his hooves on the brittle rock beneath us.

“Hai, out on the land, things can be different, lass.” Bentneck’s teeth were abnormally large for his mouth, although this seemed convenient enough, as he had a habit of chewing on his lower lip and beard. “And here, you have to keep your wits about you, you do.”

I didn't think it was prudent to point out that he didn't appear to be paying much attention to the surroundings at all. I was more interested in studying him. He looked as though he had been the victim of many battles. One of his ram's horns had been snapped, and he wore it as a drinking horn on his harness. The stump of the horn had been carefully filed, and charcoal dust had been smeared onto his hide, evidently in preparation for this expedition.

The bariaur's black leather vest and harness were covered with all sorts of weapons, from a quiver of huge metal spears, to a curved club... and a strange shield that looked to be the carapace of some creature. His neck was twisted oddly to one side, at such an angle that it always seemed he was listening to something. He caught me staring at his neck, and he smiled.

"A youth's folly, sweetling," he chuckled. "I matched wits with a gronk. He won the contest, but I was the one made the wiser."



THE PLAIN OF SHALE

The Plain of Shale lies on the ninth ring of the Outlands, though its exact location changes once every few seasons. When the weather turns cold or windy, great rolling mists descend from the Hinterlands to swallow the plain—at which point it appears elsewhere. Its shifting locale has caused many planar scholars to speculate that the plain's original home must have been near the gate town of Xaos, but they cannot explain why the plain continues to move even after distancing itself from that site.

Other scholars have offered differing theories, including claims that the Outlands considers the Plain of Shale an 'irritation,' like a scab or an itch it can't scratch. As such, it keeps ripping the plain off the land to get rid of it, but the itch always reappears where a new scab forms. And at least one yugoloth scholar has claimed that the plain moves simply because it is searching for something.

The Plain of Shale consists of leagues of square, brittle rock. The entire area is bleached of color, with blacks and grays dominating. An ashen mist rolls across it, thick enough that it is difficult to see the block canyons and mountains that surround the area. These mists also blanket the skies, cloaking the plain in its own shroud. Canyons and

fissures riddle the place, surrounded by patches of weak rock that can send an unwary party plunging miles into the earth, to be dashed against the bottom.

The plain is often the site of hunting expeditions sponsored by the Planar Trade Consortium and various mage schools. Many beasts inhabiting the Plain of Shale are valued for the spell components that can be taken from them, or are captured to serve as living weapons in conflicts across the planes. These expeditions frequently hire bariaur scouts from one of the many nomad tribes that roam the Outlands, as these tribes are known to make pilgrimages to the plain as part of their rites of passage.

We made poor time over the Plain of Shale on foot, and Xachariah (the archer) and Bentneck appeared irritated at the mages' slow, plodding pace. The Pabulum mages stopped every league or so, meditated, then talked in hushed tones among themselves. It seemed as though they were sighting, but how they could do so through the mists was a mystery to me.

Xachariah muttered at this, and he exchanged glances with Bentneck. When we finally camped for the night, the mages went off to one of the ridges and began to point across the landscape. A few of the wizardlings tended the fires and saw to the completion of the camp, setting alarms and sending whispering, invisible servants to unpack the supplies. There was a brief argument between Xachariah and the servant-mages over the fire—Xachariah demanded a natural fire be lit instead of the curtain of light spells and heat spheres the servants wished to conjure up. The servants eventually conceded, but Xachariah was clearly irritated that he had been forced to argue the point at all.

Bentneck went on a brief circuit of the perimeter, then clattered up to the campfire, coming to a stop by the archer. They began to talk, keeping their voices low to avoid being overheard by the mages. I lay awake in my bedroll and watched the two of them; I had to strain my ears to hear their conversation, but their expressions were plain to see.

“These Pabulum.” Xachariah shook his head and spat in the dust.
“An ill-omened name, don't ye think?”

“Eh? The Pab... u... Pab-uh-lum? What’s that mean?” Bentneck’s confusion was written on his features. His eyes narrowed at Xachariah, as if trying to decide whether the archer was trying to make him feel foolish. “I thought these Pab-u-lum, they were just one of those spell schools, like the weavers or the shade mages?”

“It is a spell school. The name also means food,” Xachariah replied with a snort.

His disdain was a little too loud, and his voice carried. One of the younger mages tending the fire overheard him and stood up indignantly. He was one of the servants who had argued with Xachariah over the fire in the first place, and he still looked angry about it. “You are in error... sir.” He strode toward Xachariah, who didn’t bother turning. “The ‘Pabulum’ refers to our founding motto of intellectual nourishment. The archaic definition you speak of does not pertain to... “

“Aye, well to me, being an ar-kay-ick fool ‘n’ all, it means food.” Xachariah’s voice fell like a hatchet. “And if I were ye, I’d rattle yer bone box less on this expedition, ‘n’ try and think about what yer precious motto could mean.” He didn’t even meet the servant’s gaze.

Bentneck smiled, pleased that someone else had been made the fool. The bariaur’s hands fell to the curve of his club. The mage’s eyes flashed, but he made no further comment. After a moment of silence, he turned and went back to feeding the fire.



GRONK

Bentneck awoke me at nightfall and said we were moving out. There was the distant crashing of thunder, though the skies had been clear before we made camp. I had been used to the shifting weather on the Outlands, so I thought little of it... until I realized I saw no flashes of lightning, and the darkened sky held no clouds. I asked Bentneck what the sound was.

“Hai,” Bentneck hissed. “What you hear, sweetling, is the sound of gronk love.” He chuckled to himself as he rose to wake the rest of the expedition.



Perhaps the darkness had something to do with it, but the first sighting of the gronk was not nearly as inspiring as I'd thought it would be.

I had heard the Pabulum mages speak of them in detail, even reverently, but the gronk struck me as rather ill-brained beasts. I whispered as much to Bentneck, who was watching the herd milling below us with a stone-faced expression.

The bariaur nodded at my whisper. "Hai, those stone frogs seem addled, don't they?" He adjusted his belt, feeling for his spears. "Don't worry about whispering, lass. Those hopping stones can't hear us. Near deaf, they are." He looked at me for a moment, then nodded back to the gronk. "What do you think of their young?"

I studied the herd. No young to be seen.

"I don't see any," I replied. I thought Bentneck might have better sight than me.

"Of course you don't, kit," Bentneck chuckled. "You're standing on them. Damned rude of you."

I looked down and saw only the Plain of Shale beneath me... there was dirt and some pebbles scattered across its surface. But before I could ask him for an explanation, Bentneck shook his head. "I'll spill the dark later, lass." The mages motioned for him, and he clattered up to them, readying his spear.



The slaying of the gronk herd was a minor thing. Under Xachariah's direction, a few of the lesser wizards called forth a show of dancing lights, and the gronk went mad, smashing into each other until all the herd lay dead on the plain below. It was a sickening sight, but the mages, along with Xachariah and Bentneck, seemed pleased—they were laughing and congratulating each other.



After the carnage, I walked among the gronk bodies, following slightly behind Bentneck. The gronk were huge. "Those headplates look as though they could snap a giant's shin," I remarked.

Bentneck snorted. “Hai, but those spikes are not just for bashing some berk, they’re not.” He tapped a gronk’s cracked headplate with a hoof, then lifted it up with one hand, showing me the spikes on its surface. “You see the ridges? ‘Buds,’ the graybeards call them. When the gronk smash their heads together ...” He smashed his bracers together with a clang, making me wince. “The buds on this gronk touch the buds of that gronk, and fall to the ground if they knocked their heads hard enough.” He nodded at the shale beneath us, which was flecked with pebbles. “Any of these things might be a tiny gronk, see?” He laughed and it sounded like an avalanche. “Pebbles now... gronk beasts later, hai?”

I couldn’t tell if Bentneck spoke in jest or not. When he saw my confusion, he laughed again, louder this time.

“Relax, lass ... only mages are without humor, they are.”

Gronk

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any land

FREQUENCY: Uncommon

ORGANIZATION: Solitary or Herd (see below)

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Day

DIET: Unknown (see below)

INTELLIGENCE: Animal (1)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral

APPEARING: 1 or 2–12 (see below)

ARMOR CLASS: 6

MOVEMENT: 12 (Charge 18)

HIT DICE: 4+2

THAC0: 17

ATTACKS: 1

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 2–12

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Charge

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Half damage from blunt weapons, sound-based attacks

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: L (6' tall)

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 270

Huge, squat beasts with powerful legs and a thundering croak, the gronk are also known as “hopping rocks” or “stone frogs.” The ill-tempered beasts pose a threat to the nomadic bariaur tribes that roam the Outlands, and the bariaur tribes occasionally mount hunting parties solely to thin the gronk’s numbers.

According to the bariaur nomads, gronk have existed on the Outlands for as far back as five bariaur generations. Their numbers have not increased substantially during that time, mostly due to bariaur thinning gronk herds with their rites of passage. A number of planewalkers have sighted the gronk on several Prime worlds as well.

Combat: The gronk aren’t subtle attackers. When a creature comes within their line of sight, they emit thundering croaks and hop toward the target, then smash it to death with their spiked headplates. The gronk can perform a hopping-charge up to 180 feet, striking for 2–16 points of damage.

All gronk are nearly deaf. They gain a +4 bonus to saving throws vs. any sound-based attack or spell. (If the saving throw fails, they suffer only half damage from the attack.) Bright visual displays irritate gronk. Wizards have been known to cast dancing lights or pyrotechnics spells into gronk herds to drive them into a frenzy. This results in the gronk turning on themselves until nearly every member of the herd is dead.

Habitat/Society: The gronk are so ill tempered they can't even tolerate their own species. Despite their herd mentality, the strength of the herd depends on the gronk's emotional cycle; members of a new herd can survive for a week at most before becoming irritated with one another. Soon after, their natural hatred gives way to furious bouts of head smashing. The herd then dissolves and reforms into new herds several months later. As a result, the gronk can be encountered singly or in groups, depending on their "hate cycle."

Gronk herds have been found in deserts, plains, mountains, and swamps, and in almost any climate. They shun any terrain near a large body of water, such as an ocean or lake.

Ecology: Ironically, the gronk's hatred of each other propagates their species. The gronk's reproductive organs are located near their brains, in the spiked carapace over their foreheads. The ridged spikes that cover the gronk's headplate are actually "buds." When smashed together with sufficient force, the buds are transferred between carapaces, and a new bud grows on the headplate within a few days. This new ridge either falls off or is knocked off when the gronk smashes its forehead into another creature. If this ridge touches dirt, sand, earth, or rock, it submerges a few inches beneath the ground, only to burrow forth a few months later as a tiny gronk.

The gronk have never been seen to eat; it is a mystery how they sustain themselves. A gronk's lifespan ranges from three to five years. As a gronk ages, its headplate cracks and flakes off until the creature suffers brain failure and dies.

Gronk headplates are often sought after as shields and armor plating. Gronk shields provide a -1 bonus to AC against all crushing attacks (in addition to the normal shield bonus), but they weigh over 50 pounds. Characters with less than a 15 Strength suffer a -1 penalty to all Dexterity checks and attack rolls when using the shields in combat.

Gronk headplates have also been used as a covering for siege towers and for shield walls. One bariaur myth claims gronk headplates were once placed upon an enchanted battering ram. This ram was said to act as a horn of blasting upon any structure, but it was so heavy it needed twice the number of people to carry it as a normal battering

ram.

The gronk have bladder-like glands along their necks and upper backs. If a gronk is skinned with care, a hunter can remove these glands intact. When treated with the right resins and filled with acid, the gland sacs can be used as grenades. These bladder bombs are extremely effective against fiends, and Blood War patrols occasionally capture herds of gronk, keeping them in pens in the Lower Planes to be harvested for their glands.



GRILLIG

It was fortunate, Bentneck told us several times later around the campfire, that he had stopped Xachariah's arrow before it left his bow. The bariaur, deep into his cups, went as far as to claim that he had saved us all from the archer's foolishness. Xachariah bore the stings in stride, letting the bariaur have his moment.

Xachariah had spotted the first grillig earlier that day—he had never seen one before, and was eager to add it to his list of kills. Bentneck arrived and caught his arm just as he was sighting on the creature, and as Xachariah's face flushed in anger, the bariaur shook his head slightly, warning him to be silent.

Bentneck then reached for one of the iron spears at his side and drew it from its quiver. To my surprise, the spearhead did not have a sharpened edge, but was a sphere of black iron almost half a foot in diameter. It looked as though it weighed twenty or thirty pounds, but Bentneck hefted it easily. He sighted on the scuttling creature in the valley below. "Heed this, friend," he said to Xachariah.

He then hurled the spear with all his might, and it smashed square into the creature's spine, snapping it. The creature floundered for a moment, making strange hissing giggles before falling still.

"Heed this, ye glory-hoardin' goat!" Xachariah replied angrily. "My arrow would have flown true."

Bentneck clapped him on the back, chuckling. "You don't hunt grilligs with any angled weapon, my archer friend." His reply was slow, as if to a child. Xachariah went livid. "Edges simply pass right through them." Bentneck turned his attention back to the landscape.

“You only woulda’ startled him and made him scatter. My way keeps him from bringing others.”



“But what are these grilligs?” I asked the bariaur later, when Xachariah’s anger had cooled.

“Foul pests and a nasty bunch of bleeders,” he grumbled in reply. “Can nearly murder anyone not watching themselves. I seen them bring down a herd of gronk, I have, giggling and chattering amongst themselves. Killing for them’s like a bunch of us going to see mummers at the fair.”

“Where do they come from?” The idea of a creature immune to the sweep of a blade fascinated me. I had become acutely aware of all angles after hearing Bentneck tell of the grillig’s strange defense against edges. Sharp rocks, the knives some of the servant mages wore—so many weapons were edged. Except, that is, for the ones Bentneck was carrying. Now I knew why.

“From where do the grilligs come?” Bentneck chuckled, then gnashed his teeth together. “I don’t know, lass, but I wish they’d miracle themselves back.”

“So you really don’t know?” I prompted. It seemed as though Bentneck was holding back. But it was Xachariah who finally spoke, with a wry smile and a wink at Bentneck.

“Ah ... I heard there was once a yugoloth who spat into a piece of paper, folded it up, then sent it to one of his kin. There was a secret to this foldin’, there was, and perhaps some sorceries in the paper itself. For when it was folded once too many times, then unfolded again—poof! A grillig popped forth! It looked around, saw it was on the Outlands, then looked for a place to set up its kip.” Xachariah wagged his finger at me, smiling. “Let this be a lesson for ye, lass—be wary of books and papers and things that can be folded.”

Before I could respond to his jest, the servant mage Xachariah had bickered with before interrupted. He had been sitting by the fire, listening to Xachariah’s tale.

“Actually, one of those same books you shun tells a different tale,”

the mage intoned. Xachariah bristled but kept silent. “It states that the grilligs were created by the Fosterer to bring down the Lady of Pain. Just think—” But next to me, Bentneck gave an angry rumble at the Lady’s name. Xachariah made a semicircle over his heart. “You have to admit,” the mage continued, louder this time, “that it is a far more plausible—”

“Ye’d do well to keep yer tongue from spittin’ such nonsense,” said Xachariah. “Or I’ll be keepin’ it for ye.”

The mage shifted away. An uncomfortable silence followed, which Bentneck finally broke with a snort.

“Grillig’re like rats,” he said, speaking only to me and Xachariah. “Pests. They’re a giant’s version of rats. Another blessing the Fosterer left us, he did.”

“Who is the Fosterer?” I asked.

“Don’t you know the Fosterer?” Bentneck seemed surprised. “I thought everyone had heard of that blighter.”

“It was before my day of naming,” I replied. “Who is he?”

“Who was he, more like.” Bentneck chuckled. “Usedta’ be lord of this whole plain, he was... when it was the Bladegrave, I mean, before it was the Plain of Shale.” He shook his head. “He bred the gronk and the grilligs as living weapons... don’t think he created them, but he used ’em.” He shrugged. “In the end, the Plain of Shale was all that was left.” He glanced at the terrain. “A powerful sorcerer, he was.”

“He was mad,” Xachariah added, his voice cold.

“I said he was a sorcerer, didn’t I?” Bentneck exclaimed. He turned to me. “Being addle-coved just comes with the territory for those cackling sods.”

Xachariah and Bentneck then broke into an argument, with names like Tenser and Mordenkainen tossed between them. They argued deep into the night, and I fell asleep to the sound of their bickering.

Grillig

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any angled terrain

FREQUENCY: Uncommon

ORGANIZATION: Herd

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Any

DIET: Carnivore

INTELLIGENCE: Semi (2–4)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral evil

APPEARING: 1 or 2–12

ARMOR CLASS: 8

MOVEMENT: 12

HIT DICE: 2+1

THAC0: 19

ATTACKS: 4

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 1–3/1–3/1–3/1–3/

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Nil

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Immune to edged weapons

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: M (4'–5' tall)

MORALE: Fearless (19–20) or Unreliable (2–4)

XP VALUE: 175

Grilligs are small, scaled beasts with long arms and hunched legs. Their movement resembles a gorilla's, as the grillig uses its arms to propel itself along. All four of a grillig's limbs end in three talons,

which are considered valuable spell components (see below). Grilligs are vicious pests and can be lethal if they encounter an expedition unprepared for them.

Legend has it that grilligs were born from two-dimensional angles; but whatever their origin, they cannot be hurt by any edged weapon. Arrows, spears, swords, and other such weapons pass through a grillig harmlessly.

Grilligs can be found in almost any rugged, angular terrain. Chasms, caves, and mountainous areas have been known to run thick with them.

Combat*: Grilligs prefer to weaken a target with ambushes and traps, then attack in groups until their prey is dead. In battle, they raise themselves on their forelimbs, then lash out with their foot talons, shredding targets with lightning speed.

Grilligs always gang up on victims. If all except one of the grilligs attacking a target is killed, the remaining grillig will either immediately flee combat or join another group of grilligs attacking another victim. If cornered before it can flee, the grillig hisses and gnashes its teeth, but it does not defend itself from attackers.

Habitat/Society: The bariaur call grilligs “pests that hunt their hunters.” They have a pack mentality, and their society revolves around finding something larger and meaner than themselves, killing it, then moving onto a larger, meaner creature. If they can’t find one, they will settle for lesser prey.

Usually, a grillig is encountered singly, scouting for a victim. If it finds one, it flees and gathers the others of its pack, which then stalk the target. They soften their prey with ambushes or crude traps (pushing boulders off ledges, causing avalanches, stampeding other creatures over the victim, and so on). When it comes to these ambushes, grillig display cunning equal to an average human. There is evidence to suggest that these creatures simply live to hunt, favoring that over their own survival.

Although grilligs send out lone scouts in search of victims, they never attack or kill alone—there is always more than one present. Some sages speculate that this might have something to do with a need to

have superior numbers, but certain yugoloth scholars have scoffed at this, claiming it's because "it takes more than one point to make an angle."

Ecology: It is not known how grilligs breed—more simply seem to appear when their numbers become too thin. The bariaur root out these pests wherever they find them, but no matter how many they kill, more appear in later seasons. If actively hunted, the grilligs lie low for a while, then emerge when the hunters relax their guard.

Grilligs are the reason why bariaur tribes on the Outlands carry bludgeoning weapons. Local myths claim that grilligs can appear through sharp angles in buildings or terrain, but this has never been confirmed.

Mages are always seeking ways to skin grilligs and use their hides as proof against angled attacks. The protection is thought to be in the grilligs' nature rather than in their physiology, for no one has succeeded in preserving a grillig's hide after death. When a grillig dies, its lizard-like skin becomes brittle, eventually turning to dust. If a way to preserve a grillig's hide could be found, they would become the most popular prey in the Planes.

A grillig's teeth and talons are often used as spell components when enchanting magical armor, and they have even been used as arrowheads and spearheads for magical weapons. It is said that there are rituals for giving certain weapons the "speed of a grillig," allowing the wielder of the weapon to attack multiple times in a round. Perhaps their most popular use is as a spell component for the *shield* spell. When a grillig's tooth or talon is added to the casting (add 1 segment to the casting time), the spell gives the caster an additional -1 bonus to AC vs. edged attacks. Some mages wear necklaces of grillig teeth for just such occasions.



SOHMIEN

"The sohmien were sired by nightmares," Bentneck said. Whatever was in his drinking horn this night had loosened his tongue again, and his words were stronger and steadier than before. "They're revenge, they are. Revenge made flesh. They rose from the blood of one of the

nightmare lords, and they come now to all those who seek revenge and bind themselves to them.”

“Nightmare lords?” I echoed. I had never heard of any such thing.

Bentneck nodded. “Hai, lords. They used to rule the nightmares, and the fiends would have to barter with them to use the steeds.”

Bentneck squinted at me. “Have you ever heard of the Gloom Meet, kit? That’s when all the fiends gather to speak to the others. Them nightmares ride the skies to gather the fiends to this meeting, they do.”

“But once...” Bentneck smiled. “Once, the fiends called a Gloom Meet that was only for the purpose of killing. They lured the last of the nightmare lords there to kill him. An old ‘mare, he was, and powerful. But them fiends... they were tired of dealing with him for the use of his children, they were.”

Bentneck took another swig from his horn. “They called him to the meet, and the fiends set upon him. They tried to put him in the dead-book with every trick they could. They scattered the soil with caltrops covered with the foulest poisons in the hells, hurled barbed cold-iron spears a league’s length into him, and when he tried to take to the air to escape, they turned the sky alight with magic, blinding his eyes white. They struck at him with everything in their hateful arsenal, but still he lived. He looked like one of them quills near the end of his flight. They hounded him to the edge of the Hinterlands, firing curses and spears into him until he staggered into the mists—and died there, as the tale goes.”

Bentneck lowered his voice, trying to frighten me. “It’s said when the old lord stumbled into the mists of the Hinterlands, his dark blood left a blistering trail behind him. And where his blood fell? The Outland itself cried out, wailing like a banshee, uttering the cries the nightmare lord would not.” Bentneck took another swig and wiped his chin.

“Then, three years later, the sohmien rode from the Hinterlands. Answering the Fosterer’s call.” The bariaur’s eyes seemed unfocused, staring at the horizon. Then he blinked and shook his head.

“Hai!” he snorted, clattering his hooves against the ground. Then he

spat onto the earth. “A foul breed. The Planes are a darker place for their presence.”



“We need to pick up the pace if we’re going to catch them hell-horses,” Xachariah said to the Pabulum’s leaders on the following night. “At this rate, ye’ll see nothin’ of them, ye will. Luck has it, I’ve seen tracks that lead to the nor—”

“You have been hired to guide, not dictate,” the Pabulum graybeard said sharply. “If you find this to be beyond your ability, then—”

“Aye, ye hired me to guide ye to yer precious spell components and other bits and skins ye want off these creatures,” Xachariah snapped. “Aye? And that’s why ye’re stoppin’ every five steps, mumblin’ amongst yerselves, is it?”

The Pabulum leader became silent. Every mage around the campsite suddenly stopped and turned toward Xachariah. The act in itself was not threatening— but the fact that they had all done so in unison was.

The smile left Bentneck’s face. Xachariah went still, but his eyes narrowed.

“What ye’re here for don’t matter ta me,” the archer said finally, lowering his voice in disgust. “I’ll guide ye, but be square with me...” Xachariah smiled coldly, almost fiend-like. ” ‘Cause if ye’re lookin’ for the Fosterer’s remains, I can help ye, I can. Yer lookin’ for his old home, aye? Where he died... and what he left behind, aye?”

It was as though Xachariah had lit two flames in the mage’s eyes. The Pabulum graybeard rose from his seat. “Are these things known to you?”

Xachariah nodded. “I’ll guide ye there on the morrow, I will.” He nodded at the bedrolls. “We can’t travel there tonight, so get yer rest. We’ll speak more in the morn.”

The Pabulum mages did not reply. They simply followed Xachariah with their eyes as he turned and walked out of the campfire’s light.



Sohmien (SOH-ME-IN)
CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Plains/Hinterlands

FREQUENCY: Varies (see below)

ORGANIZATION: Herd

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Nocturnal

DIET: Special

INTELLIGENCE: Animal (1)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Chaotic evil

APPEARING: Varies

ARMOR CLASS: 8

MOVEMENT: 15

HIT DICE: 2+1

THAC0: 18

ATTACKS: 1 bite/2 hooves/1 gore/1 spine

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 1–6/1–6/1–6/1–8/1–8

SPECIAL ATTACKS: Spines, fear stampede

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Nil

MAGIC RESISTANCE: Nil

SIZE: M

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 270

Sohmien resemble huge horses with leathery, ashen hides and dead white eyes. They leave trails of mist in their wake, resembling that

which shrouds the Hinterlands. The touch of their hooves kills vegetation and taints the land for years.

A sohmien's shoulder blades extend beyond its head and neck, and three bone spikes (extensions of its spinal column) sprout from each shoulder.

These creatures are said to have been born from the fall of the last of the nightmare lords. According to legend, this nightmare lord was lured to the Gloom Meet by his subjects, then attacked by fiends who had tired of bartering for permission to use his steeds. The nightmare lord was driven into the Hinterlands, his body riddled by cold iron spears and arrows. It is believed that where his blood struck the earth, sohmien sprang forth.

Sohmien hate nightmares and attack them over all other targets. It is said the ride of the sohmien will not end until they kill every nightmare in existence.

Combat: Sohmien prefer to attack with the spines that project from their shoulder blades. Three spines sprout from each shoulder; the top two primary spines can be fired at an opponent for 1–8 points of damage each. Sohmien spines make a horrible whistling noise when fired, and shriek when they taste blood. The spines are treated as +1 enchanted weapons, inflict double damage against nightmares, and regrow in 2d4 days.

After firing both primary spines, a sohmien gores with its secondary spines. The sohmien prefer to aim for nonvital areas, allowing a creature to experience as much pain as possible before closing in for the kill.

A sohmien's secondary spines extend a foot past its head, impaling a target for 1–8 points of damage. On a natural 20, the spines have gored the opponent so deeply that the sohmien can also bite the target for 1–6 points of damage. Sohmien have been known to bite and trample targets with their hooves for 1–6 points of damage each, but this is rare.

The stampede of the sohmien inspires fear in any creature with fewer than 2 HD, forcing a Morale check. Nic'Epona, bariaur, and horses receive a +4 bonus to their Morale checks. The sohmien can only

stampede at dusk, and only at the request of someone who has invoked them (see below).

Habitat/Society: According to myth, sohmien are creatures of vengeance. They can be summoned by any vengeful mage or priest of sufficient power through a ritual called the sohmien pact (a spell believed lost long ago).

When summoned, sohmien must be ordered to ride, destroying all in the path leading to the creature that has wronged the summoner. The ride ends only when the sohmien are slain or when they have reduced the offending creature to near-death (1 hit point). At that point, the sohmien wait, pawing the ground. If their victim desires revenge for the attack, the sohmien can be sent stampeding back to the summoner. What happens when the sohmien return is unknown, but chronicles state that the summoner vanishes forever. Myths claim the summoner's voice joins the frightful wails that follow the sohmien as they ride from the Hinterlands.

No one has ever successfully used a sohmien as a mount.

Ecology: Sohmien do not eat, sleep, or mate; their rides are governed by some cycle that eludes scholars, for herds of them emerge from the Hinterlands randomly, then return. It is likely they appear only when a creature craves vengeance.

The spines of the sohmien are useful for harming, binding, or (in some circumstances) summoning nightmares. They can also be used to make arrows of slaying nightmares and for strengthening enchantments in weapons of vengeance. Usually the spine is ground to powder and applied to the weapon.

A sohmien's spines turn to vapor within three days of being taken from the corpse.



TRELON

Bentneck woke me in the night, and as I was about to ask him if we were moving out, he clamped his hand over my mouth. His eyes were wide, and he chewed at his lower lip. He motioned for me to follow, but as I reached for my supplies, he shook his head. We moved as quickly and silently from the campsite as we could.

Someone had let the fire die, but I saw the unmoving shapes of the Pabulum mages still sleeping around the site. There was no guard.

Moments later, we joined Xachariah, who was clutching a torch. He fixed me with a stare. “We’re givin’ this place the laugh,” he whispered. “Are ye with us?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Xachariah looked more anxious than I’d ever seen him before. Bentneck wasn’t even paying attention to the two of us—he was clutching one of his iron spears in his hands and studying the darkness around him.

“I didn’t know the dark of it till this night. Do ye know what those addled mages are lookin’ for?” Xachariah hissed. “Do ye? They’re lookin’ for the Fosterer, they are. Where he fell. They’re hell-bent on trying to dig up his lost works.” When Xachariah spat, it struck the shale beneath our feet and made a strange ringing sound. “They’ll find it, they will, and that’s why we haveta’ make haste.”

“If it’s here, why—”

“Those deaders up there don’t know. I do.” Xachariah frowned as he glanced at the darkness around him, then back to me. “Every beast ye’ve seen here is one of the Fosterer’s lost works ...”

“Dead?” I replied—because I hadn’t heard much beyond ‘deaders.’ “They’re dead?”

“They will be,” Xachariah hissed. “Those fools never thought to ask why they had to shell out a lifetime’s jink and glitter for us to guide a group of spell-slingers to this plain. They jest thought we were hard dealers.” He snarled, his eyes gleaming. “They don’t know what the shadows hold here, but they’ll soon know the dark of it, they will.”

“But ... we can’t just ...”

“We can, and we will.” Xachariah shook his head. “Those fool mages said they needed guides to hunt the monsters that filled this plain, and we agreed. They said naught about dredgin’ up the Fosterer’s old knowledge—and that, I will have nothin’ to do with. A blight he was,

and nothing good ever came from what was in that sod's brain-box. It deserves to lie in the dead-book with him." Xachariah nodded at the darkness. "He's to blame for breedin' the critters you see here, and for cursin' this plain so nothin' grows here 'cept monsters."

He glanced up at the campsite. I saw the shadows stirring, and a faint clicking noise began to grow. I suddenly realized why Xachariah had argued with the servants about the fire on the first night we made camp. But a dead fire was no proof against the creatures that began to appear.

"They want the Fosterer's treasures, do they?" Xachariah snarled, gripping his torch tightly. "Look. They come for them now."



Xachariah told me of the trelons later that night, when we were leagues from the campsite that had become the Pabulum mages' graveyard.

"They hate mages," he said. "In a gronk-mean kind of way. They'll kill an archmage in his sleep, they will, and there's only a few things that's proof against a trelon. One is natural light—not some light sorcery, but a good burning fire or lamp. Light sorceries just make them swarm." Xachariah looked at Bentneck. "Some of the others are cold steel and the courage to stand yer ground before they slice ye in two."

As we walked, intent on leaving the unseen horror of the campsite behind us, the archer was thoughtful. "They're insects, near as I can figure. They drift in and out of shadows, and none can really make them out until they show themselves. Ye can always kind of hear 'em if ye know they're there... it's like a faint clickin'. The tale goes that the Fosterer first found them on some Prime world, gathered 'em up, then dumped them into the Academy of Weavers in the fifth ring. The trelons frenzied, slaughtered the whole school. Not one mage survived."

In response to my horrified reaction, Xachariah frowned. But he finished his tale.

"Beasts beget beasts, though. And in the end? Evil feeds on itself.

The dark of the matter is, he couldn't find the trelons once they were done ... they'd just seemed to have vanished. He thought no more about it. Until the night they came for him—and that's where the story of the Fosterer ends.”



Trelon

CLIMATE/TERRAIN: Any shadowy area

FREQUENCY: Rare

ORGANIZATION: Hive

ACTIVITY CYCLE: Nocturnal

DIET: Mages

INTELLIGENCE: Low (7)

TREASURE: Nil

ALIGNMENT: Neutral evil

APPEARING: 1–3/mage

ARMOR CLASS: 2

MOVEMENT: 12

HIT DICE: 3+1

THAC0: 17

ATTACKS: 2

DAMAGE/ATTACK: 2–7/2–7

SPECIAL ATTACKS: –3 penalty to opponents' surprise

SPECIAL DEFENSES: Immune to illusions, phantasms, and shadow magic

MAGIC RESISTANCE: 35%

SIZE: L

MORALE: Fearless (19–20)

XP VALUE: 420

Trelons originated on one of the Prime worlds and were brought to the Outlands by a sorcerer living on the ninth ring. This sorcerer used them as weapons, transporting them into the Academy of Weavers near Curst, where the trelons murdered the entire school of illusionists in their sleep.

Trelons have been described as a “mixture of orange and shadow.” They have two long arms that end in curved spikes, two mandibles near the mouth for feeding, and two spindly legs. According to legend, trelons were created to exterminate mages on some long-dead Prime world. True or not, the trelons seem to hate mages and magic in general.

Trelons do not like natural light, and torches or strong lanterns can prevent a trelon from attacking its target. Light spells, however, drive them into a frenzy, and they attack any opponent using such magic without hesitation.

Combat: A trelon swarm is terrible to behold. When they appear, they mob any nearby creature, tearing through their victims like scythes. Trelons attack with their two arm spikes, which bisect a target like a pair of cutting shears. When a trelon has killed a target, the mandibles around its mouth scoop up the remains of its victim. Trelons do not stop to feed until they have killed every non-trelon in sight.

Trelons never appear at any distance greater than 30 feet from their victims. Until a victim comes within range, the trelons simply don't exist. A target might never even know that it is in the middle of a swarm of trelons until they suddenly begin to materialize, imposing a –3 penalty to their prey's surprise roll. Where these creatures come from is unknown, but they seem to appear only in shadowy conditions where there is no natural light. It is not known where they retreat to once they have finished their attack.

No one knows how these creatures hunt. Some believe that the trelons track a creature by its spellcasting, its shadow, its emotions, or

its sound. It is known that trelons have the ability to track a victim through almost any spell or magical item designed to cloak the victim. They are drawn to invisibility, *dust of disappearance*, displacements, and shadow magic. Trelons can sense a target no matter how well it is hidden. It has been observed (under extremely bloody circumstances) that magical cloaking effects drive trelons into a rage, and they prefer to attack any invisible or cloaked target in range.

Trelons are immune to *hold monster*, *protection from evil*, illusions, shadow magic, and mind-influencing spells. They are the bane of illusionists, so much so that a trelon's claw is often a component used in the creation of arrows or other weapons designed to slay illusionists, shadows, or creatures from the Ethereal Plane.

Habitat/Society: Trelons speak in soft clicks and chittering noises, which rise to a near-deafening screeching when they strike. Their insect nature makes several sages suspect that they might have a hive mentality, but like much that is known about trelons, this is only speculation.

Ecology: Trelons seem to combine the worst characteristics of demons and insects. They appear to favor cool, shadowy places. The scent of magic or a wizard causes them to swarm.

Trelons are valued for their talons, which are long enough to be used as sword blades. When properly enchanted, they can become fearsome mage-slaying weapons. Tales have been told of how such weapons prefer to attack mages in combat, sometimes twisting in their owner's grip to stab at a magic-user, no matter the intended target. There are also rumors that trelons eventually come to reclaim the piece of their kin taken from them.

Trelon blood is said to give *arrows of slaying* (notably those that slay mages, illusionists, and shadows) extra abilities, but these abilities are unknown. Any attempt to use trelon blood to boost spellcasting or in magical rituals has caused the spell to fail—and has, in some circumstances, summoned a swarm of trelons to the scene.



Planescape: Torment: Enhanced Edition, which features remastered

music, a 4K interface, and gameplay updates curated by original lead designer Chris Avellone, is **available now for PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, and Android.**

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GRONK

Huge, squat beasts with powerful legs and a thundering croak, the gronk are also known as “hopping rocks” or “stone frogs.” The ill-tempered beasts pose a threat to the nomadic bariaur tribes that roam the Outlands, and those tribes occasionally mount hunting parties solely to thin the gronk’s numbers. According to the bariaur nomads, gronk have existed on the Outlands for as far back as five bariaur generations. Their numbers have not increased substantially during that time, mostly due to bariaur thinning gronk herds with their rites of passage. A number of planewalkers have sighted the gronk on several Prime worlds as well.

Violent and Antisocial. When a creature comes within its line of sight, a gronk emits a thundering croak and hops toward the target to smash it to death with its spiked headplate. All gronk are nearly deaf, and bright visual displays irritate them. Tales tell of wizards who cast *dancing lights* into gronk herds to drive them into a frenzy. This results in the gronk turning on themselves until nearly every member of the herd is dead.

The gronk are so ill tempered that they can’t even tolerate their own species. Despite their herd mentality, the strength of the herd depends on the gronk’s emotional cycle, and members of a new herd can survive for a week at most before becoming irritated with one another. Soon after, their natural hatred gives way to furious bouts of head smashing. The herd then dissolves and reforms into new herds several months later.

Unusual Biology. Ironically, the gronk’s hatred of each other propagates their species. A gronk’s reproductive organs are located near its brain, in the spiked carapace over its forehead. The ridged spikes that cover the gronk’s headplate are actually buds that exchange reproductive material when two gronk smash their heads into each other, then subsequently fall off. If a fallen bud touches dirt, sand, earth, or rock, it submerges a few inches beneath the ground, only to burrow forth a few months later as a tiny gronk.

The gronk have never been seen to eat; it is a mystery how they sustain themselves. A gronk’s lifespan ranges from three to five years. As a gronk ages, its headplate cracks and flakes off until the creature suffers brain failure and dies.

Valuable Parts. Gronk headplates are often sought after for use in creating shields and armor plating, including for siege towers and shield walls. One bariaur myth talks of gronk headplates being placed upon an enchanted battering ram that could act as a *horn of blasting* upon any structure, but which needed a huge number of people to carry it.

The gronk also have bladder-like glands along their necks and upper backs that can be removed with care after a gronk is slain. When treated with the right resins and filled with acid, the gland sacs can be used as grenades, and are known to be extremely effective against fiends.



GRONK

Large monstrosity, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 37 (5d10 + 10)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)	1 (–5)	13 (+1)	5 (–3)

Skills Athletics +5, Perception +3

Damage Immunities bludgeoning from nonmagical attacks

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Hopping Charge. If an enemy is within 45 feet of the gronk, the gronk can increase its speed to 45 feet and use its movement to hop toward that enemy, moving normally through other creatures’ spaces or difficult terrain. If it finishes this movement next to the original enemy and makes a spiked headplate attack against it, the gronk has advantage on the attack roll.

Hard of Hearing. A gronk has disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that involve hearing, but has advantage on saving throws that require it to hear another creature.

ACTIONS

Spiked Headplate. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) piercing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

GRILLIG

Grilligs are small, scaled beasts with long arms and hunched legs. Their movement resembles that of gorillas, as they use their arms to propel themselves along. Grilligs are vicious pests and can be lethal if they encounter an expedition unprepared for them.

Legend has it that grilligs were born from two-dimensional angles. But whatever their origin, they are strangely resistant to arrows, spears, swords, and other edged weapons. They can be found in almost any rugged, angular terrain. Chasms, caves, and mountainous areas have been known to run thick with them.

Pack Tactics. Grilligs have a pack mentality, and their society revolves around finding something larger and meaner than themselves, killing it, and then moving onto a larger, meaner creature. They prefer to weaken a target with ambushes or crude traps (pushing boulders off ledges, causing avalanches, stampeding other creatures over the victim, and so on). They then attack in groups, raising themselves on their forelimbs to lash out with their foot talons, and shredding targets with lightning speed.

If all except one member of a grillig pack is killed, the remaining grillig either flees combat or joins another group of grilligs. If cornered before it can flee, a lone grillig hisses and gnashes its teeth, but it does not defend itself from attackers.

Unknown Natures. It is not known how grilligs breed—more of them simply seem to appear whenever their numbers become too thin. The bariaur root out these pests whenever they find them, but no matter how many they kill, more appear in the later seasons.

GRILLIG

Medium monstrosity, neutral evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 19 (3d8 + 6)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	4 (–3)	13 (+1)	7 (–2)

Skills Acrobatics +5, Perception +3

Damage Immunities piercing, slashing

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The grillig makes four talons attacks.

Talons. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target.
Hit: 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage.

If actively hunted, the grilligs lie low for a while, then emerge when the hunters relax their guard. Members of bariaur tribes on the Outlands always carry bludgeoning weapons against the threat of a grillig attack.

A grillig's teeth and talons can be used in the creation of magic armor as well as magic arrowheads and spearheads. It is said that secret rituals can give certain weapons the "speed of a grillig," allowing the wielder of the weapon to make a frenzy of multiple attacks.



SOHMIEN

A sohmien resembles a huge horse with a leathery, ashen hide and dead white eyes. Its shoulder blades extend beyond its head and neck, and bone spikes (extensions of its spinal column) sprout from each shoulder.

Sohmiens leave a trail of mist in their wake, resembling that which shrouds the Hinterlands. The touch of their hooves kills vegetation and can taint the lands they stampede across for years. No one has ever successfully used a sohmien as a mount.

Sohmien do not eat, sleep, or mate, and their rides are governed by some cycle that eludes scholars. Herds of them emerge from the Hinterlands randomly before returning, and many suspect that they appear only in response to a creature craving vengeance.

Born of Nightmare. According to legend, the last of the nightmare lords was lured to the Gloom Meet by his subjects, then attacked by fiends who had tired of bartering for permission to use his nightmares. The nightmare lord was driven into the Hinterlands, his body riddled by cold iron spears and arrows. It is believed that where his blood struck the earth, sohmien sprang forth.

Sohmien hate nightmares and attack them over all other targets. It is said that the ride of the sohmien will not end until they kill every nightmare in existence.

Sadistic Combatants. Sohmien prefer to start combat at range with their shoulder spines, each of which makes a horrible whistling noise when fired and shrieks when it tastes blood. In close-up combat, a sohmien gores and bites its foes in non-vital areas, allowing a creature to experience as much pain as possible before its eventual death.

A Thirst for Vengeance. According to myth, sohmien are creatures of vengeance. They can be summoned by any vengeful mage or priest of sufficient power through a long-lost ritual called the sohmien pact. When summoned, sohmien must be ordered to ride, destroying all in the path leading to the creature that has wronged the summoner.

The ride ends only when all the sohmien are slain or when they have reduced the offending creature to near death. At that point, the sohmien wait, pawing the ground in the hope that their victim will seek its own revenge by sending them stampeding back to the first summoner. What happens when the sohmien return is unknown, but chronicles talk of the original summoner vanishing, its voice joining the frightful wails that follow the sohmien as they ride from the Hinterlands.

SOHMIEN

Medium aberration, chaotic evil

Armor Class 11

Hit Points 32 (5d8 + 10)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	12 (+1)	15 (+2)	2 (–4)	12 (+1)	4 (–3)

Skills Perception +3

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Fear Stampede. When six or more sohmien enter combat together in an environment of dim light or darkness, each creature that can see the stampede must succeed on a DC 11 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened for 1 minute. A creature that is riding a mount has advantage on this saving throw.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The sohmien makes one gore attack and one bite attack. If either attack hits, it can also make a hooves attack. Alternatively, the sohmien can make three spines attacks.

Gore. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d10 + 3) piercing damage.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

Hooves. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) bludgeoning damage.

Spines. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d8 + 1) piercing damage. This attack is treated as magical.



TRELON

Trelons originated on one of the Prime worlds and were brought to the Outlands by a sorcerer living on the ninth ring. This sorcerer used them as weapons, transporting them into the Academy of Weavers near Curst, where the trelons murdered the entire school of illusionists in their sleep.

Trelons have been described as a “mixture of orange and shadow.” They have two long arms that end in curved spikes, two mandibles near the mouth for feeding, and two spindly legs. According to legend, trelons were created to exterminate mages on some long-dead Prime world. True or not, the trelons seem to hate mages and magic in general.

Deadly Swarms. A trelon swarm is terrible to behold. When they appear, they mob any nearby creature, tearing through their victims like scythes. Trelons attack with their two arm spikes, bisecting a target like a pair of cutting shears. They do not stop until they have killed every non-trelon in sight, but when the fight is done, the mandibles around their mouths scoop up the remains of their victims.

Trelons do not like natural light, and torches or strong lanterns can prevent them from attacking. However, magical light drives them into a frenzy, and they attack any opponent using it without hesitation.

Unseen and All Seeing. A trelon never appears at a distance of greater than 30 feet from other creatures. Targets might thus never know that they are in the middle of a swarm of trelons until the creatures suddenly begin to materialize. How this ability works remains a mystery, but trelons are known to appear primarily in shadowy conditions where there is no natural light. It is likewise not known where they retreat to once they have finished their attacks.

Some believe that the trelons track creatures by their shadows, their emotions, or the sounds they make. But it is also known that trelons have the ability to track a victim through the use of spells or magic items designed to conceal the user. They are drawn to those protected by *invisibility*, a *cloak of displacement*, and similar magic, and can sense targets no matter how well they are hidden. Magical cloaking seems to drive trelons into a rage, and they often attack invisible or cloaked targets before other foes.

Mysterious Ways. Trelons speak a unique language that consists of soft clicks and chattering noises, which rise to a near-deafening screeching when they strike. Their insect-like nature makes several sages suspect that they may have a hive mentality, but like much that is known about trelons, this is only speculation.



Trelons are valued for their talons, which are long enough to be used as sword blades and make fearsome mage-slaying weapons when properly enchanted. Likewise, trelon blood is said to be usable in the crafting of unique *arrows of slaying* meant to kill mages. But incidents have been recorded in which attempts to use trelon blood in magical rituals have instead summoned a swarm of trelons to the scene.

TRELON

Large monstrosity, neutral evil

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 51 (6d10 + 18)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	13 (+1)	16 (+3)	7 (–2)	16 (+3)	7 (–2)

Skills Perception +7

Condition Immunities charmed, paralyzed

Senses truesight 120 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages Trelon

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Always Hidden. To any creature more than 30 feet away from the trelon, the trelon is invisible and makes no sound. This invisibility cannot be overcome by any mundane or magical means.

Magic Resistance. The trelon has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The trelon makes two claw attacks. If both attacks hit the same target, that target takes an extra 7 (2d6) slashing damage.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d8 + 2) slashing damage.

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DMs Guild Adepts

Each issue, we spotlight great content from among thousands of products available from hundreds of Dungeon Masters at the DMs Guild. Yet as Chris Lindsay noted: “One thing we noticed after watching the platform for a while was that our fan creators weren’t necessarily talking to each other. For the most part, each fan creator has worked in a silo of their own creation, making contributions to the guild as solo artists, and while they have been coming up with some fantastic products, we know from our experience on the D&D team that the best D&D products are collaborative efforts.”

Thus came about the **DMs Guild Adept program**. As Chris elaborated: “We have chosen ten extremely talented individuals and, not unlike lion robot vehicles, formed them into a singular formidable entity of creative D&D development. We’ve given them early access to the upcoming adventure from D&D, *Tomb of Annihilation*, and have challenged them to create kickass adventures and rules options to accompany the launch of that product.”

The **first ten authors** have since had their products published on the DMs Guild in conjunction with the launch of *Tomb of Annihilation*, which include the following:

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Heart of the Wild

Contributor: Rich Lescouflair



THE SEETHING HALLS

ONE SQUARE = 5 FEET

Though the curse was lifted, the damage had already been done. The remainder of the Obanashi clan left the safety of the mountainside and journeyed eastward. When the Spellplague washed over Chult, the location of the halls had been lost in the mists of history.

LOCATING THE SEETHING HALLS

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7

(Select to view)

A group of adventurers are tasked to uncover a secret that lies deep within a forgotten sanctum, one protected by those who still practice the old teachings of Chultan magic. Their failure spells doom for one of their companions, while success will bring upon the wrath of an ancient order of zealots. Can the party solve the mysteries of the forest temple before they are overtaken by the fearsome Mage Hunters? An adventure for levels 5-10.

Visit the product page at DMs Guild.

The Ruins of Matolo

Contributor: Cindy Moore

RHILLEG

Aarokocra Necromancer

Rhilleg was once a proud member of the Aarokocra tribe that inhabits The Mistcliff. He is the youngest son of the chieftain, and was the Wing of the Hunt; the title given to the leader of those responsible for providing food for the tribe.

Rhilleg was a good commander and led his team on many successful hunts. He was well liked because he continually taught the others tricks that would make them better hunters. He served as a mentor for many of the young aarokocra looking to become a productive part of the tribe. Then tragedy struck while the group was out on a hunt. Rhilleg was leading an expedition in a region of the jungle rarely hunted by the team, as reports of ferocious predators kept most humanoids out of the area. Rhilleg often made bold choices like these to keep the tribe abundant in food. Unfortunately for him it was a trap set by a group of pterafolk, the aarokocra's natural enemy.

Rhilleg was slain when the group was ambushed by the pterafolk. The surviving aarokocra were able to return his body to his family. The Chieftain, grief stricken, declared war on the pterafolk. The tribal shaman successfully performed a ritual to raise Rhilleg from the dead. He changed, however, because of his experience and refocused his effort into learning the arcane arts. Fascinated with death, he specialized in Necromancy. This fascination turned dark quickly, as Rhilleg began to animate the dead bodies of the fallen and turn them against his enemies. Now lacking the compassion and honor of the tribe he belonged to, his father banished Rhilleg from his home.

As the Death Curse started to sweep over Chult, Rhilleg started to waste away like all the others that had been raised from death. He met Ras Nsi, another affected by the curse, and the two of them collaborated to find a way to recover from this affliction. Together they work to ensure Acererak succeeds in his plans so they may have life everlasting.

Rhilleg has been assigned to the Ruins of Matolo. Here he is to secure the area and make certain that the few remaining worshipers of Ubtao do not enter the temple. Ubtao has been missing from the island of Chult for a very long time. Acererak wishes to remain operating in secret on the island; without a petty god interfering.



(Select to view)

The dead are walking the jungles of Chult. The ruins of Matolo are

rumored to be their destination. What has awoken to lure the creatures there? Perhaps it is the place where the cure can be found to the curse that plagues Toril. An adventure for characters of levels 5-10 that takes place in the jungles of Chult.

[Visit the product page at DMs Guild.](#)

Return of the Lizard King

Contributor: Shawn Merwin

MEMBER OF THE TRIBE

You're a member of a lizardfolk tribe. You live in the jungles or swamps—or wherever your tribe lives—and you're a survivor. You've managed to make the environment your home, you understand the dangers and the pleasures of that place, you understand your role in the tribe, and you know there's always someone out there to help you: your tribe is your family.

Skill Proficiencies: Nature, Survival

Languages: Pick one. The tribe speaks it.

Tool Proficiencies: Herbalism kit or poisoner's kit

Equipment: An herbalism kit or poisoner's kit, hempen rope (50 feet), tribal totem symbol, stone or bone hatchet (handaxe) or knife (dagger), and a gem worth 10 gp.

Role in the Tribe

The tribe has roles for its people. In order for the tribe to survive, you must know and accept your role. To shirk your duties would be to put the lives of your tribe at risk. Choose the role you played in the tribe, or roll on the table below.

d6 Roll	Tribe Role
1-3	Hunter/Gatherer
4-5	Crafter, Cook or Caretaker
6	Leader


Feature: The Tribe

Your tribe is your family. If one of you is in trouble, the whole tribe rises to the challenge. You can go to them when threatened, and they offer shelter and food to you and anyone you vouch for. They help in other ways if possible. Likewise, if they ask for your help, you are bound by the same tribal bonds. To shirk this responsibility is to risk being made an outcast.

Suggested Characteristics

d4 Personality Trait

- The leader of my tribe shares great wisdom that I wish to share with everyone I meet.
- I am fascinated by the culture and languages of outsiders.
- I believe the gods will show me my path. I invoke their name when I need them, thank them when things are good, and appreciate the challenges they set before me when things are bad.
- The beasts of the lands inspire my actions and wisdom.



d4 Ideal

- Independence.** I love the tribe but feel stifled by the tribal laws. I wish to be more than my role. (Chaotic)
- Creativity.** The world we live in can and should be turned into useful things that are also beautiful. (Neutral)
- Order.** Every member of the tribe has their role to play, including me. (Lawful)
- Might.** If I become the strongest member of the tribe, I can become the leader. (Neutral)

d4 Bond

- The shaman has mentored me throughout my young life. I owe them a debt I may never be able to repay.
- I protect the tribe because it is my role and my pleasure.
- I am one with the spirits of my lands and always seek to protect them.
- I crafted the symbol of my heart for my love and they rejected it. I will prove to them I am worthy of their love.

d4 Flaw

- I am marked by the other tribes of the region as a problem and they seek to kill me.
- While I trust the tribe implicitly, it takes a lot for me to trust an outsider.
- I believe people think I'm stupid, especially outsiders, and it infuriates me.
- I've never been satisfied with my role—I always want to have a different one.

Return of the Lizard King

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Chapter 6: Chult Lizardfolk

(Select to view)

In Chult’s Valley of Dread, warring tribes of lizardfolk have kept each other in check for centuries. As the tribes slowly fall under the sway of a new leader, omens point to the return of an ancient threat. Adventurers from a far-away realm find themselves in the middle of the fray. Their heroics could save the land from terrible evil, or could play a part in bringing about doom!

Return of the Lizard King is an adventure for characters level 1-4,

<https://dnd.dragonmag.com/2020/02/13/the-best-of-the-dms-guild-6/content.html>[8/15/2022 12:08:36 PM]

playable as a lead-in to *Tomb of Annihilation*. Report your players' decisions, and see how they affect a forthcoming high-level adventure in the same setting! The adventure also includes new playable races, class archetypes, backgrounds, feats, spells, and monsters designed specifically for this adventure and for *Tomb of Annihilation*.

[Visit the product page at DMs Guild.](#)

Ruins of Mezro

Contributor: Will Doyle

APPENDIX I: NEW CLASS OPTIONS

BACKGROUND: HERETIC

Where gods vie for supremacy through trickery and murder, and mortals ascend to godhood, so there is heresy. You believe in a doctrine outlawed by your faith, taught to you in secret by other heretics. Perhaps your superiors excommunicated you from your temple, or forbidden dogma provided answers to questions you never sought. Whatever your origin, you're now shunned by the faithful, or worse, hunted.

Skill Proficiencies: Deception, Religion

Languages: Two of your choice

Equipment: A holy symbol (subtly modified to represent your own heretical belief), a prayer book or prayer wheel, vestments, a bottle of invisible ink, a quill, a set of common clothes, and a pouch containing 10 gp.

HERETICAL BELIEF

Hundreds of outlawed sects exist throughout the Forgotten Realms. Choose a belief that defines you as a heretic, or roll on the table below.

d8	Belief
1	Dark Moon. A doctrine that ascribes Selúne and Shar as two aspects of the same deity.
2	Fatemakers. Tymorans who believe mortals can influence and control luck.
3	Threefold God. A belief that Tyr, Helm and Torm are all the same god.
4	Forsaken One. A conspiracy that Savras and Leira conceived and abandoned a god child.
5	Three-Faced Sun. The sun is a tripartite deity, with divine aspects of dawn, noon and dusk.
6	Shared Suffering. Flagellant Ilmatari who say all mortals must share their god's suffering.
7	Entropy. Belief that dying gods sent a divine sphere of annihilation to Toril to kill wizards.
8	Harlot's Coin. Belief that Waukeen sold her divinity to Graz'zt and he receives her prayers.

FEATURE: HERETICAL CONTACTS

You know where to find heretics in settlements where your faith is represented. If no heretics are present, you can indoctrinate weak-willed souls if you spend a day preaching. Where heretics are present, you can always find a place to hide, rest and recuperate. If needed, they can also help you escape the settlement on a cart or through a secret tunnel.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Heretics survive by living on the run, or by blending into the ranks of greater faiths. They tend to be suspicious folk with zealous ideals and unshakable convictions. This sometimes manifests as a sense of superiority over the "unenlightened".

d8	Personality Trait
1	I think I'm right even when I'm wrong.
2	I pity those who deny the heresy.
3	I always scope out the closest exits and position myself near them.
4	Those who refute my beliefs are damned and not worth saving.
5	I'm sure my god has chosen me for a greater destiny.
6	I'm a natural orator, but once I start talking it's difficult for me to stop.
7	I'm always looking over my shoulder and the slightest things startle me.
8	I believe the end of the world is nigh.



(Select to view)

Ancient Mezro lies silent and ruined, her treasures plundered by foreign explorers. Flaming Fist mercenaries have staked a claim to the site, but they aren't the only ones seeking to unravel its hidden mysteries. Other, darker powers have set their sights on its secrets. Ruins of Mezro is a complete adventure site for characters of level 1-15, providing everything you need to run freeform adventures in the ruined city.

Visit the product page at DMs Guild.

The Turtle Package

For our storytelling issue, here's another tale to consider:

Once upon a time (specifically, the spring of 2017), a great debate raged which threatened to tear apart the delicate peace within the walls of Wizards of the Coast. On one side, there stood those firmly opposed to the reintroduction of turtles into the game (as Mike Mearls posited in his [twitter poll](#)).

On the other side, stood those firmly in support of turtles (as Jeremy Crawford posted [in his](#)).

The supporters of turtles won out.

In support of our 2017 [Extra Life charity efforts](#), Chris Perkins designed the turtle package, with proceeds benefitting Children's Hospitals. Hosted on the DMs Guild, this supplement introduces a new playable character race, the turtle, permissible within the D&D Adventurers League. In addition, the supplement further includes a new adventure location: Dangwaru, the Typhoon Palace, and even a few monsters, such as the dreaded decapus (first appearing way back in *B3: Palace of the Silver Princess*).

So we encourage you take a look at the Guild Adept material, and believe you'll find it useful for your *Tomb of Annihilation* campaigns. And we certainly hope you'll consider purchasing [the Turtle Package](#), both as material for your game, as well as a donation to a very worthy cause!

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Streaming Highlights

Play Games. Buy turtles. Heal Kids!



The only thing we love more than playing Dungeons & Dragons is playing D&D to raise money for kids. And 2017 marks the fourth year we have brought the D&D community together to benefit Children's Miracle Network Hospitals.

Since 2013 we've raised an astounding \$290,000 for this worthy cause, with help from our amazing community of DMs, players, donors, and viewers! A whopping \$74,000 of that was raised last year and this year we



want to go even further. That's why we're doubling down by streaming not only from the d20 Studio at the Wizards of the Coast offices, but also bringing together many of our livestream gamers from multiple locations across the globe.

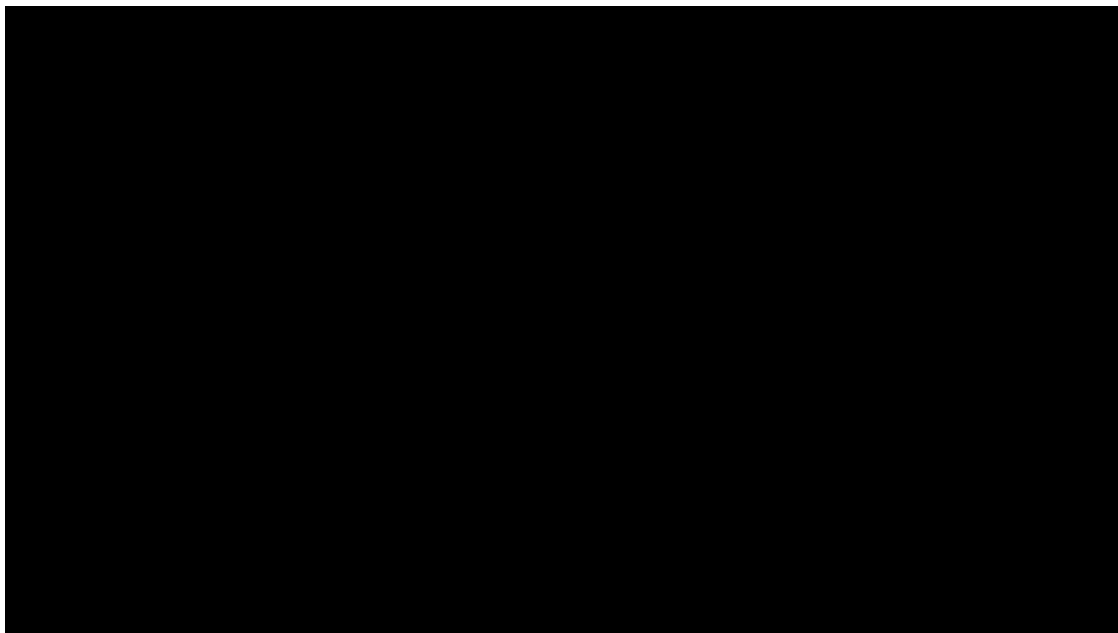
We'll kick off events on the evening of November 3, 2017 with a live session from Gamehole Con, featuring Mike Mearls as well as such players as Maze Arcana's Satine Phoenix and Ruty Rutenberg. Then on November 4, you'll be able to watch 12 hours (count 'em, 12!) of D&D live play during the official Extra Life event day. That run includes [Chris Perkins' game and Encounter Roleplay's livestream](#), as well as [Lauren Urban and Shawn Wood's sessions](#) at the Wizards of the Coast offices. Dragon Talk's Greg Tito will be your host throughout.

Since the whole idea is to raise money for a good cause, Wizards of the Coast has created its first fundraising superteam. That means you, your local game store, your online gaming clan, your place of work, your school, your friends, or basically anyone we haven't already mentioned, can link up with us, have fun, and raise money! [Click here to see our superteam homepage](#), then click the "Create a Sub Team" button to join us now!

As usual, your participation is always rewarded. From cool art and new spells, to class information, and character details from *Tomb of Annihilation*, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, and *Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms*, the more we raise the more free content you get!

The *Magic: the Gathering* team recently held their own Extra Life charity event, which included D&D play (crossing over

Chult/Ixalan). Check out the video below to see Chris Tulach, Kat Kruger, and James Wyatt chat with *Dragon+* host Bart Carroll about designing a D&D adventure in the new *Magic: The Gathering* setting:

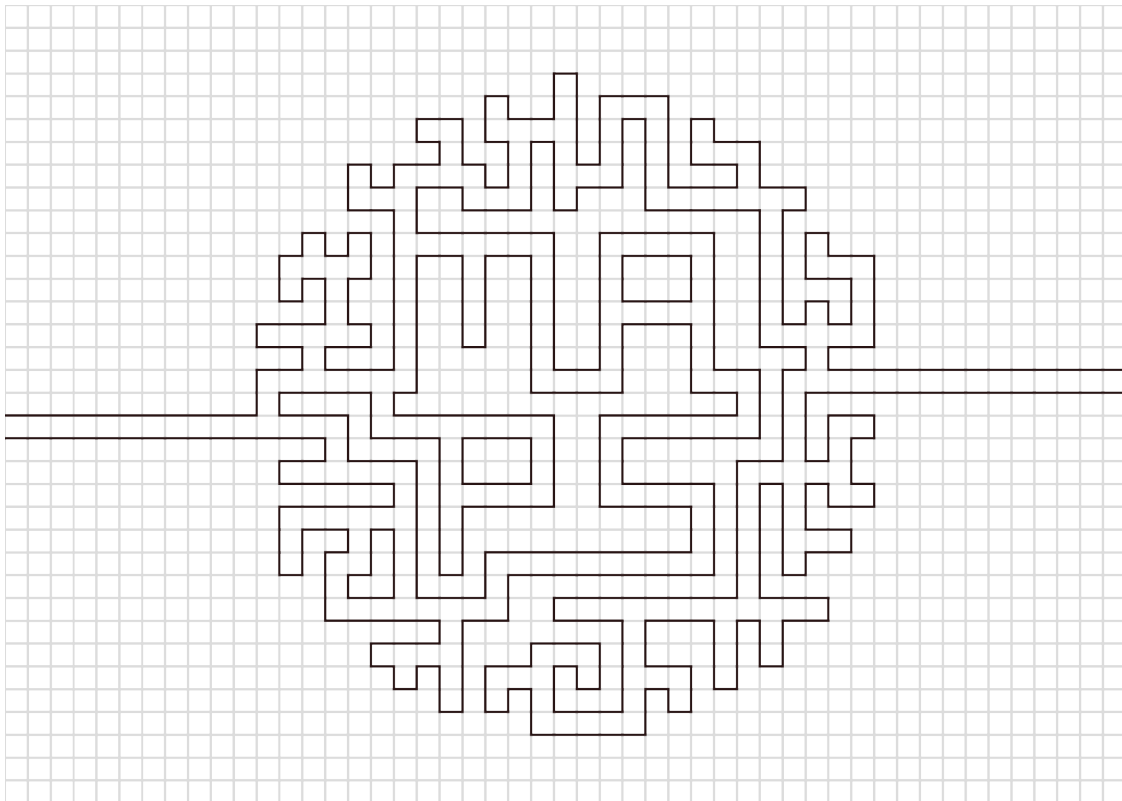


Plus, you can watch footage of the game in action [here](#).

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Maps of the Month

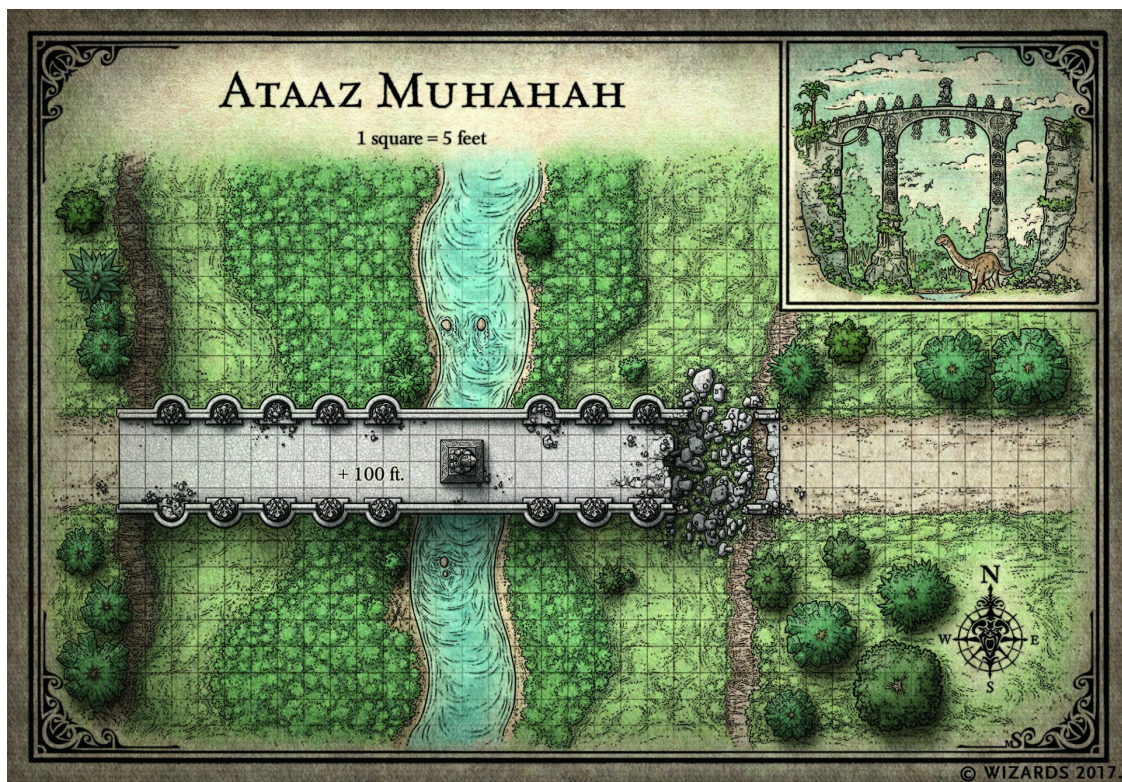
For this issue, we're pleased to offer a selection of maps from Storm King's Thunder



WARNING: THESE MAPS MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS

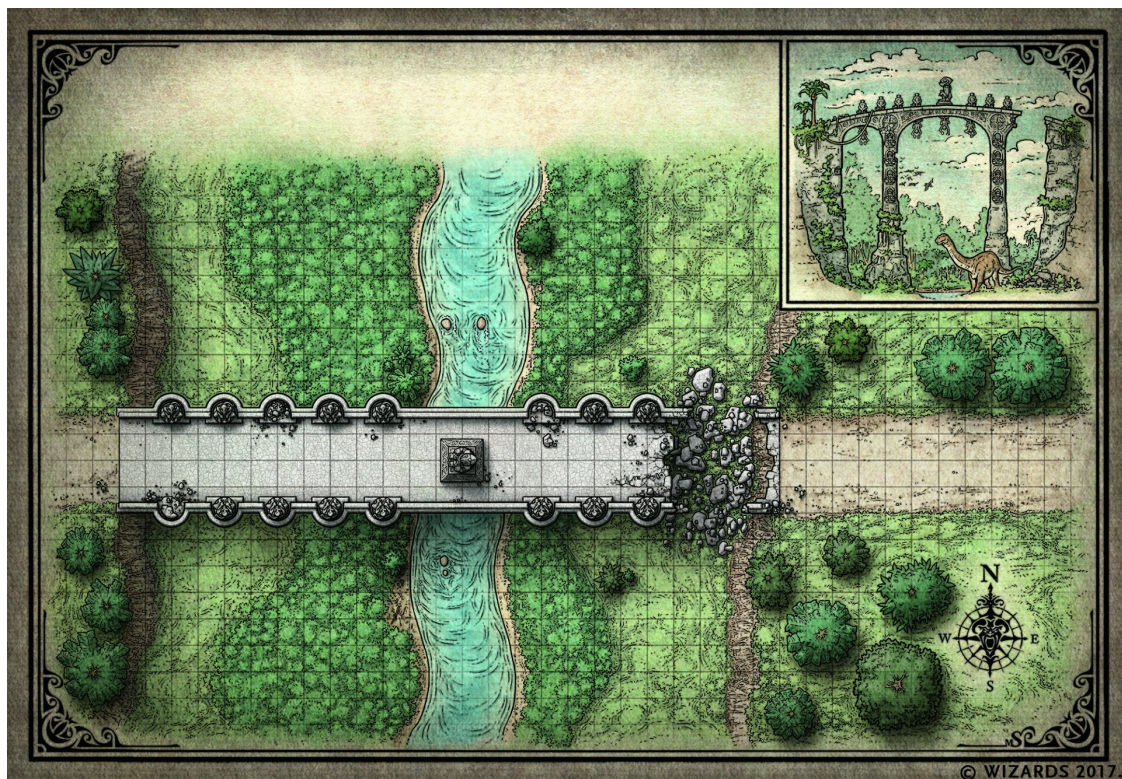
Tomb of Annihilation

Ataaz Muhahah:



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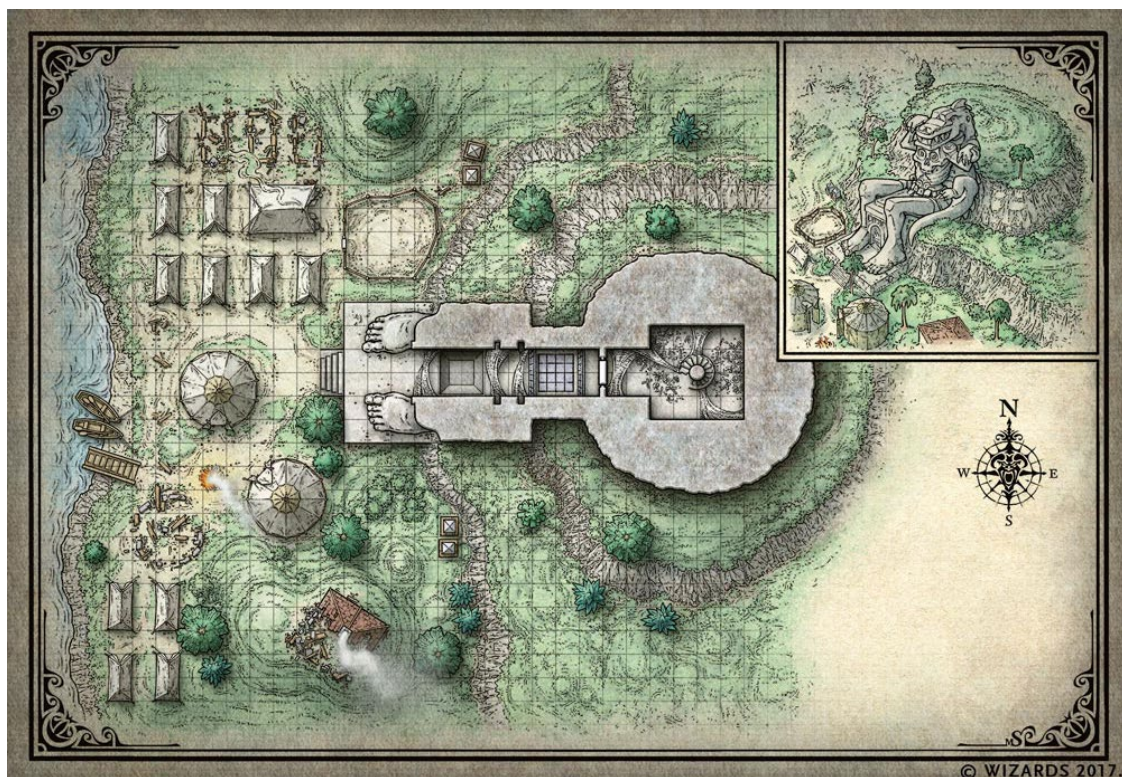
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Camp Righteous



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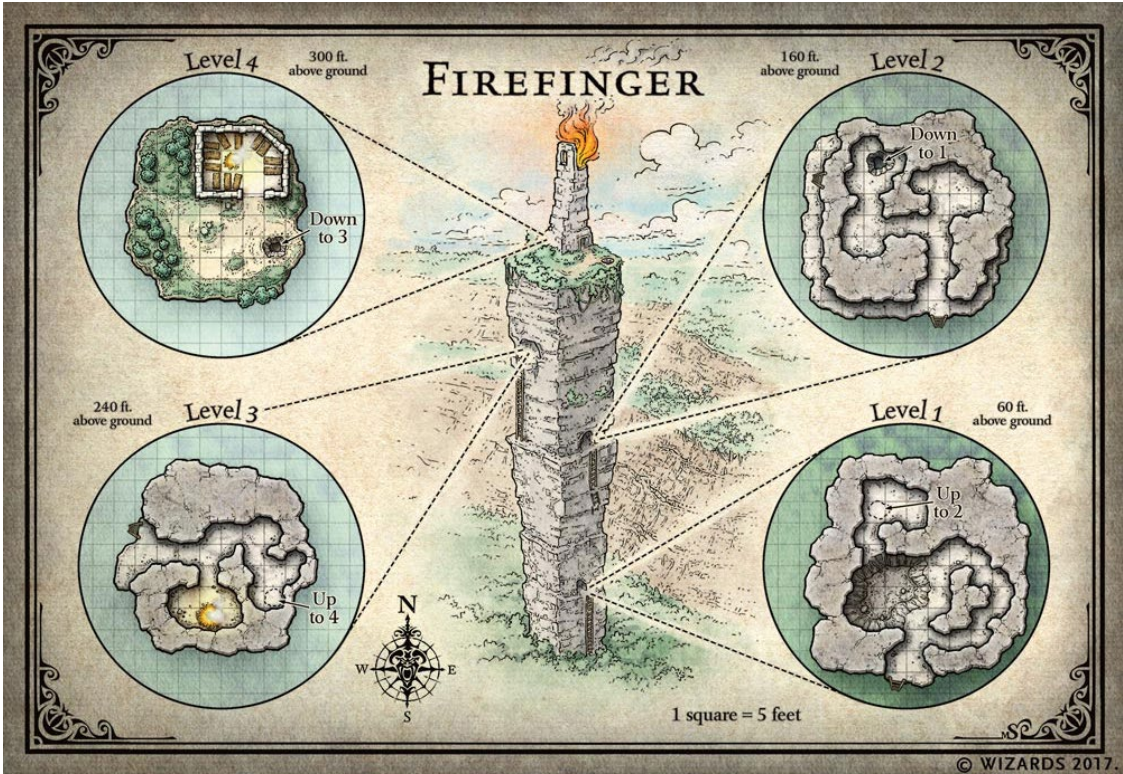
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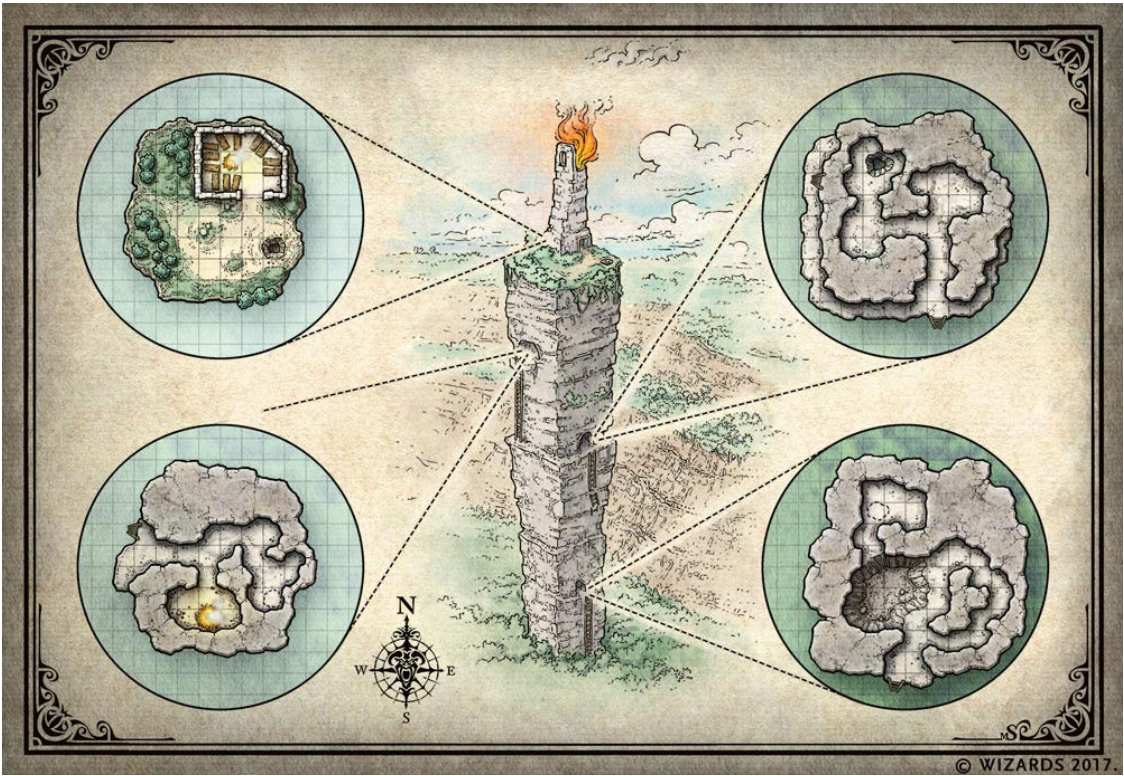
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Firefinger



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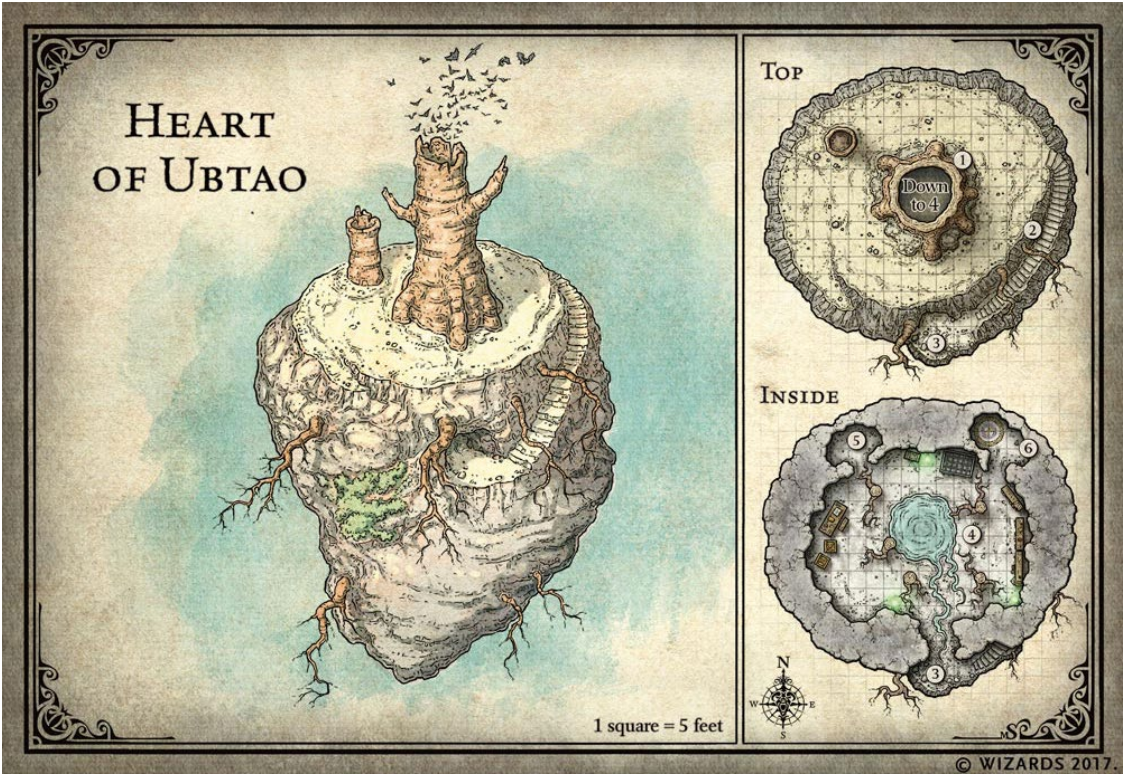
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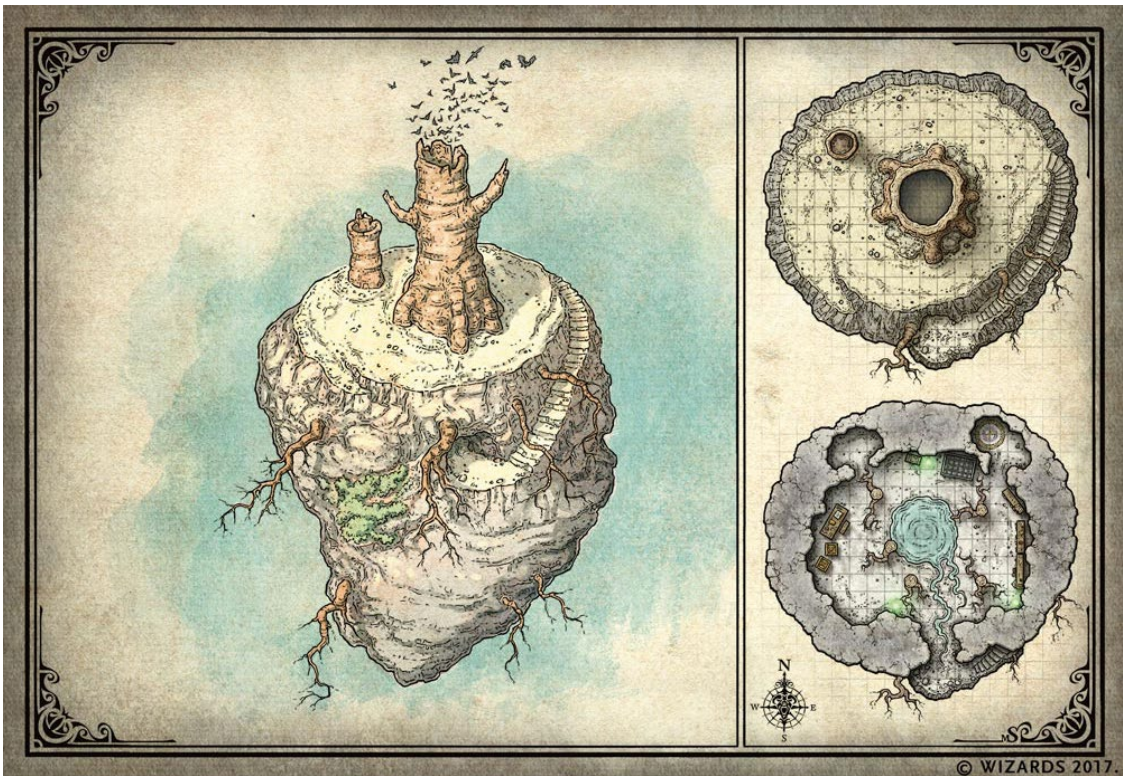
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Heart of Ubtao



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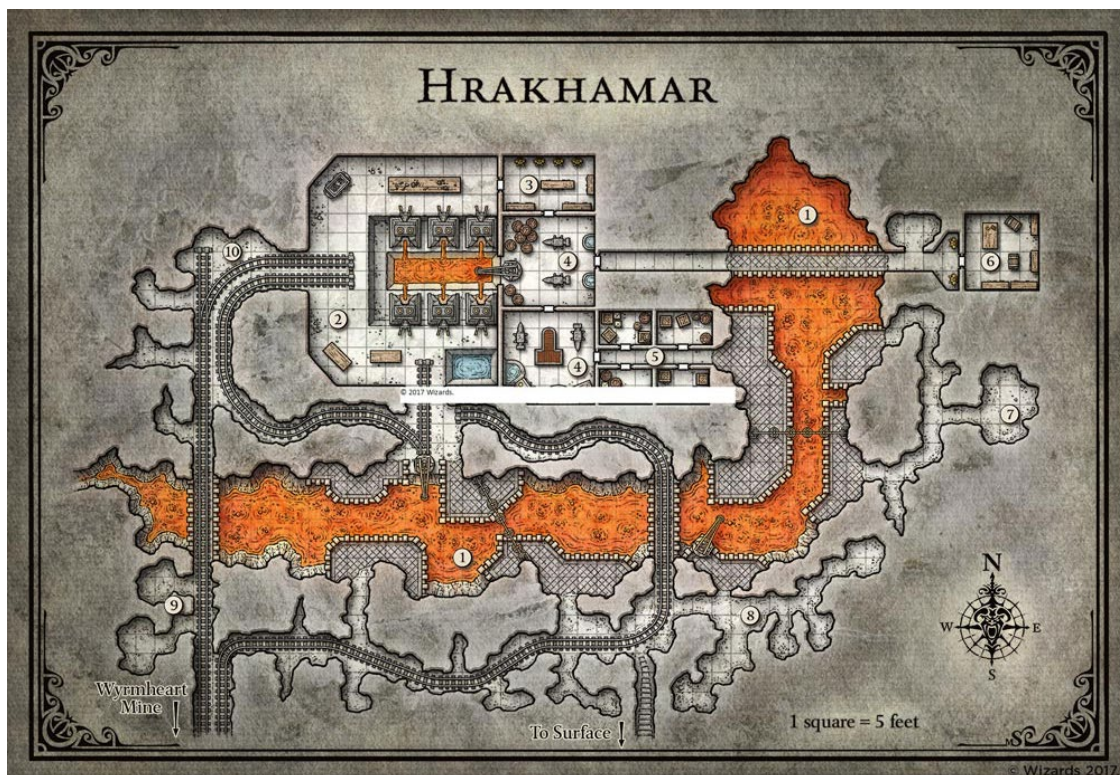
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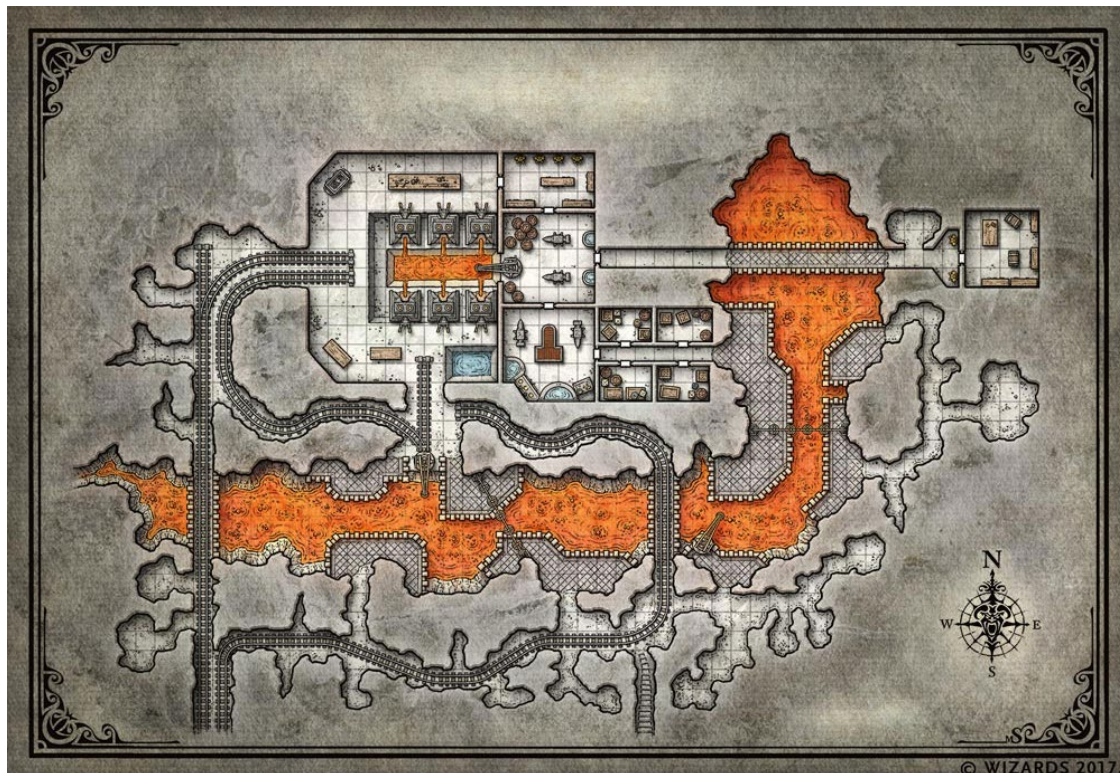
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Hrakhamar



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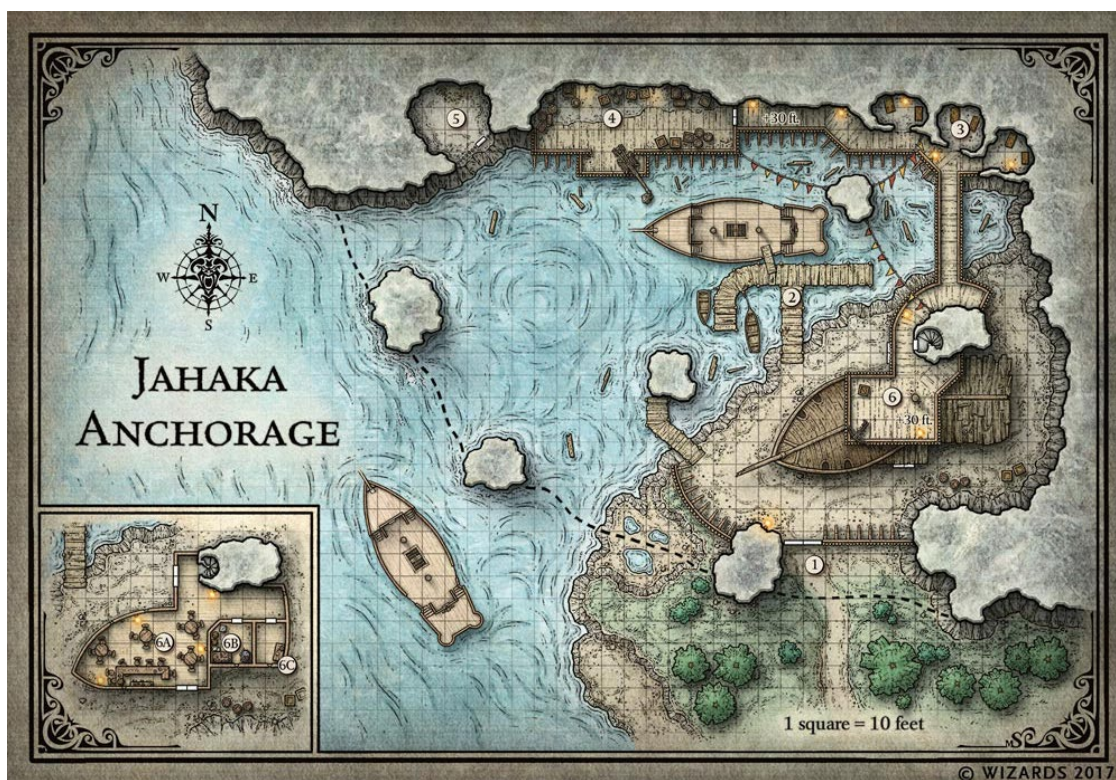
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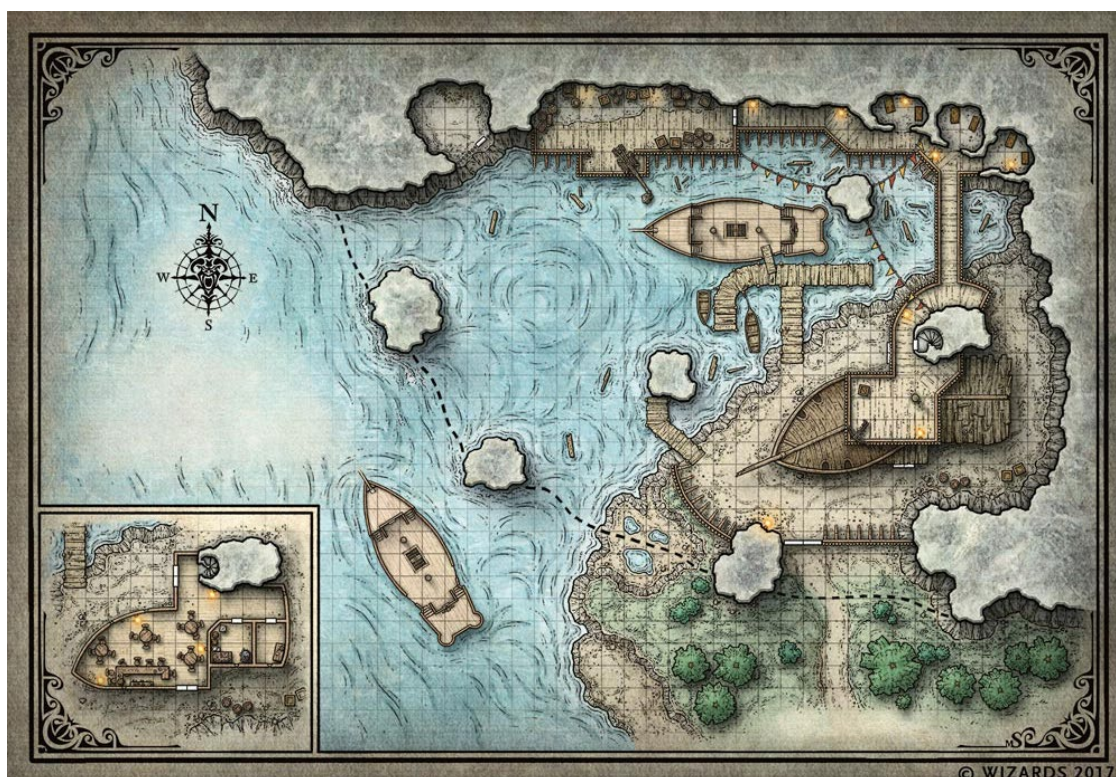
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Jahaka Anchorage



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HIGH-RES VERSION

Digital Maps

Please note that *Tomb of Annihilation* can soon be found at [Fantasy Grounds](#) and on the [Roll20](#) virtual tabletop. Look for the adventure to appear there in the coming days.

Cartographers

And as always, our appreciation goes out to our amazing cartographers; which this issue includes Mike Schley. To discover more of his work, please visit [his website](#).

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Unearthed Arcana: Fiendish Options

Jeremy Crawford and Mike Mearls introduce new playtest options for tieflings...

Playtest Material

The material here is presented for playtesting and to spark your imagination. These game mechanics are in draft form, usable in your campaign but not refined by final game development and editing. They aren't officially part of the game and aren't permitted in D&D Adventurers League events.

If we decide to make this material official, it will be refined based on your feedback, and then it will appear in a D&D book.

In time for the lengthening shadows of autumn, we present a collection of fiendish options for you to playtest: new subraces for tieflings, ways to customize diabolical cults, and demonic boons that wicked NPCs can receive from the denizens of the Abyss.

A survey on these options is now available on the D&D website. Please try them out and let us know in that survey what you think about them.

Access the full details of these tiefling character options and learn—if you didn't know already—why devils want cults!

[Download the PDF](#)

To see the full treasure trove of Unearthed Arcana articles, covering new classes and feats, conversions of rules from previous editions, and much more, **[visit the archive here](#)**.

Have a request for Unearthed Arcana? **[Follow @mikemearls on Twitter](#)** and let him know.

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Tiefling Subraces

At your DM's option, you can create a tiefling character whose ancestry includes a special link to one of the Lords of the Nine Hells. This link is represented by a subrace.

Subrace Traits

If your tiefling has a subrace, choose one of the following options—whichever one corresponds to the diabolic being connected to the tiefling's family.

The traits of the chosen subrace replace the tiefling's Ability Score Increase and Infernal Legacy traits given in the *Player's Handbook*. There is one exception: tieflings connected to Asmodeus. Those tieflings use the traits in the *Player's Handbook*.

Asmodeus

The tieflings connected to Nessus command the power of fire and darkness, guided by a keener than normal intellect, as befits those linked to Asmodeus himself. Such tieflings use the Ability Score Increase and Infernal Legacy traits in the *Player's Handbook*.

Baalzebul

The crumbling realm of Maladomini is ruled by Baalzebul, who excels at corrupting those whose minor sins can be transformed into acts of damnation. Tieflings linked to this layer can corrupt others both physically and psychically.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Intelligence score increases by 1.

Legacy of Maladomini. You know the *thaumaturgy* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *ray of sickness* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *crown of madness* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Dispater

The great city of Dis occupies most of Hell's second layer. It is a place where secrets are uncovered and shared with the highest bidder, making tieflings tied to Dispater excellent spies and infiltrators.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Dexterity score increases by 1.

Legacy of Dis. You know the *thaumaturgy* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *disguise self* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *invisibility* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Fierna

A master manipulator, Fierna grants tieflings tied to her forceful personalities.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Wisdom score increases by 1.

Legacy of Phlegethos. You know the *friends* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *charm person* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *suggestion* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you

finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Glasya

Glasya, Hell's criminal mastermind, grants her tieflings useful magic in committing heists.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Dexterity score increases by 1.

Legacy of Malbolge. You know the *minor illusion* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *disguise self* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *invisibility* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Levistus

Frozen Stygia is ruled by Levistus, an archdevil known for offering bargains to those who face an inescapable doom.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Constitution score increases by 1.

Legacy of Stygia. You know the *ray of frost* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *armor of Agathys* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *darkness* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Mammon

The great miser Mammon loves coins above all else. Tieflings tied to him excel at gathering and safeguarding wealth.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Intelligence score increases by 1.

Legacy of Minauros. You know the *mage hand* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *Tenser's floating disk* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a short or long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *arcane lock* spell once with this trait, requiring no material component, and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest.

Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Mephistopheles

In the frozen realm of Cania, Mephistopheles offers arcane power to those who entreat with him. Tieflings linked to this place master some arcane magic.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Intelligence score increases by 1.

Legacy of Cania. You know the *mage hand* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *magic missile* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *web* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Zariel

Tieflings with a blood tie to Zariel are stronger than the typical tiefling and receive magical abilities that aid them in battle.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and your Strength score increases by 1.

Legacy of Avernus. You know the *thaumaturgy* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *searing smite* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *branding smite* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

Diabolical Cults

Cults dedicated to infernal beings are the foes of adventurers throughout the D&D multiverse. This section gives DMs ways to customize the members of cults dedicated to the powers of the Nine Hells.

Each archdevil attracts a certain type of person based on the gifts the devil offers. In the following cult descriptions, stat blocks from the *Monster Manual* are suggested in a cult's Typical Cultist entry to help you represent those people.

Each description also includes a list of signature spells associated with the cult. If a cult member can cast spells, you can replace any of those spells with spells from that list, as long as the new spell is of the same level as the spell it replaces.

Why Devils Want Cults

For all their might, most devils are effectively trapped in the Nine Hells. While other planar creatures use magic to move between planes, devils require either a portal they can physically walk through or a summoning conducted by an entity on a distant plane. They have little will in determining where they can go.

Because of this restriction, on the Material Plane most devils work through cults. Cults typically consist of folk who have used rituals to contact devils and pledge their souls to them in return for power. The Lords of the Nine drive most of the soul trade, and the gifts they can offer are determined by Asmodeus's decrees.

Cult of Asmodeus

Asmodeus demands the loyalty of all cultists who gain power and leadership in the cults of the Nine. His cult overarches all the others.

Any NPC who leads a diabolical cult must also acknowledge the power of Asmodeus. In return, the most skilled and worthy of those cult leaders gain the Demands of Nessus trait.

Demands of Nessus. At the start of each of this creature's turns, this creature can choose one ally it can see within 30 feet of it. The chosen ally loses 10 hit points, and this creature regains the same number of hit points. If the creature is incapacitated, it makes no choice; instead, the closest ally within 30 feet is the chosen ally.

Cult of Baalzebul

Goals: Restoration of honor and respect, at the cost of those who stole it

Typical Cultist: Any NPC or monster who has suffered a fall from grace

Signature Spells: *Minor illusion* (cantrip), *disguise self* (1st level), *phantasmal force* (2nd level), *major image* (3rd level)

Baalzebul typically recruits individuals rather than cults. He offers hope to those whose failures drive them to seek redemption.

Baalzebul sometimes increases the Charisma of those who follow him. He also grants a boon,

the Path of Baalzebul trait, that allows a favored cultist to look good in light of an ally's failure.

Path of Baalzebul. As a bonus action on its turn, this creature can choose one ally it can see within 30 feet of it. Until the start of this creature's next turn, it gains advantage on all ability checks and attack rolls, while the chosen ally suffers disadvantage on all ability checks, attack rolls, and saving throws.

Cult of Dispater

Goals: Power gained and used in secret, influence exerted via blackmail, control of people and organizations through knowledge of their weaknesses and shames

Typical Cultist: Acolyte, bandit, bandit captain, cult fanatic, cultist, mage, noble, spy

Signature Spells: *Guidance* (cantrip), *identify* (1st level), *see invisibility* (2nd level), *clairvoyance* (3rd level)

Dispater trades in secrets, offering them in return for a creature's soul. His cults typically trade secrets to devils in return for other information. They often hatch conspiracies aimed at toppling and replacing governments or religious orders.

Renegade mind flayers sometimes strike pacts with Dispater in search of the secrets needed to forever escape an Elder Brain's domination.

Cultists can gain the Infernal Insight trait. Cult leaders might also have the Vexing Escape trait.

Infernal Insight (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest).

As a bonus action, this creature gains advantage on all ability checks and attack rolls it makes until the end of the current turn.

Vexing Escape (1/Day). As a reaction when this creature takes damage, it reduces that damage to 0 and teleports up to 60 feet to an unoccupied space it can see.

Cult of Fierna

Goals: Control over the emotions of others, turning them into puppets and playthings

Typical Cultist: Acolyte, archmage, bandit captain, cult fanatic, cultist, knight, noble, priest, spy

Signature Spells: *Friends* (cantrip), *charm person* (1st level), *suggestion* (2nd level), *hypnotic pattern* (3rd level)

Fierna is a master manipulator. Mortals who desire success in love or who seek to become beloved leaders at the head of a band of fanatics are drawn to striking bargains with her.

Fierna grants gifts that allow her cultists to manipulate emotions; they gain increases to Charisma, as well as proficiency with skills such as Persuasion and Intimidation. In addition, cultists can gain the Infernal Loyalty trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Loyalty beyond Death trait.

Infernal Loyalty. This creature has advantage on saving throws while it can see a creature within 30 feet of it that has the Loyalty beyond Death trait.

Loyalty beyond Death (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As a reaction when an ally this creature can see is reduced to 0 hit points, that ally is instead reduced to 1 hit point and gains temporary hit points equal to this creature's Charisma score + half its number of Hit Dice.

Cult of Geryon

Goals: Physical prowess, domination of others through strength, destruction of all opposition

Typical Cultist: Bandit, bandit captain, berserker, cult fanatic, cultist, gladiator, thug, tribal warrior, veterans

Signature Spells: *Shillelagh* (cantrip), *wrathful smite* (1st level), *enhance ability* (2nd level), *aura of vitality* (3rd level)

Despite being deposed, Geryon still has the ability to strike bargains. He deals especially with those who seek brute strength. Any warlike monster—such as orcs, ogres, and trolls—can be lured into Geryon's cult.

Geryon's cultists typically form fighting companies and bandit gangs, proving their strength by defeating others in battle and taking what they want as loot.

Geryon grants increases to Strength and Constitution. In addition, cultists can gain the Crushing Blow trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Indomitable Strength trait.

Crushing Blow (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As a bonus action, the creature gains a bonus to the damage roll of its next melee weapon attack. The bonus equals its Strength modifier (minimum of +1).

Indomitable Strength (Recharge 5–6). As a reaction when this creature takes damage, it can roll a d10 and subtract the number rolled from the damage.

Cult of Glasya

Goals: Power gained by turning a system against itself, yielding power that is not only absolute but legitimate on a cultural and legal basis

Typical Cultist: Bandit, bandit captain, cult fanatic, cultist, knight, noble, spy, thug

Signature Spells: *Friends* (cantrip), *charm person* (1st level), *invisibility* (2nd level), *haste* (3rd level)

As an expert in finding loopholes and exploiting the law for her own good, Glasya is a patron of thieves and other criminals, especially corrupt nobles. Her influence is supposed to strengthen family bonds, but she has taken a liberal interpretation of that and offers gifts that can be turned against family members.

Goblins who risk insurrection against their hobgoblin masters make pacts with Glasya, as do kenku who form criminal gangs.

Glasya grants increases to Charisma and Dexterity. In addition, cultists can gain the Step into Shadows trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Infernal Ring Leader trait.

Step into Shadows (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As an action, this creature, along with anything it is wearing and carrying, magically becomes invisible until the end of its next turn.

Infernal Ring Leader. As a reaction when this creature is hit by an attack roll, it can choose one ally it can see within 5 feet of it and cause that ally to be the target of that attack roll instead.

Cult of Levistus

Goals: Survival and eventual revenge against those who wrong them

Typical Cultist: Assassin, bandit captain, cult fanatic, cultist, mage, noble, spy, thug

Signature Spells: *Blade ward* (cantrip), *expeditious retreat* (1st level), *spider climb* (2nd level), *gaseous form* (3rd level)

Levistus has no cult in the traditional sense. Instead, he offers favors to those who are desperate to escape a seemingly inevitable fate.

Drow are sometimes worshipers of Levistus, as their cruel society often pushes them into situations they feel they can't escape.

Levistus usually grants those who pledge their souls to him a single chance to escape from

danger, but some cunning folk strike a deal with Levistus, pledging their souls to him in return for escape at a future date. This boon takes the form of the Path of Levistus trait.

Path of Levistus. This creature magically teleports to a location of Levistus's choice within 1 mile of its location. This ability also restores all of the creature's hit points. It can be invoked as an action by the creature or when the creature would die. Once the creature uses it, the creature can't use it again.

Cult of Mammon

Goals: Wealth, secured not only to promise personal comfort and power but to deny wealth and its benefits to others.

Typical Cultist: Bandit, bandit captain, cult fanatic, cultist, noble, spy, thug

Signature Spells: *Mending* (cantrip), *Tenser's floating disk* (1st level), *arcane lock* (2nd level), *glyph of warding* (3rd level)

Mammon's greed overwhelms everything else. He deals with mortals who desire material wealth and provides them with the ability to spread that greed like an infection.

The greedy duergar and even some dragons are prone to falling prey to Mammon's temptations, and merchants and trade guilds are vulnerable to his bargains.

Mammon's cultists can gain the Grasping Hands trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Promise of Wealth trait.

Grasping Hands (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As a bonus action, this creature makes a Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check contested by the Wisdom (Insight) check of a creature it can see within 15 feet of it. If this creature succeeds, one handheld item of its choice that it can see on the target magically teleports to its open hand. The item can't be one that the target is holding, and it must weigh no more than 10 pounds.

Promise of Wealth (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As a bonus action, this creature chooses one creature it can see. Up to five allies of its choice become convinced that the target carries great wealth. Until the end of this creature's next turn, those allies gain advantage on all attack rolls against the target.

Cult of Mephistopheles

Goals: Magical skill and power, backed with the will to use it to crush rivals

Typical Cultist: Archmage, cult fanatic, cultist, mage, priest

Signature Spells: *Fire bolt* (cantrip), *burning hands* (1st level), *flaming sphere* (2nd level), *fireball* (3rd level)

As a master of the arcane arts, Mephistopheles finds eager recruits among those who study magic. Any monster that uses spells, such as storm giants and oni, might follow him, and wizards' guilds and conclaves of sages are the most likely to come under his influence.

Mephistopheles grants spellcasting ability to many of his followers. In addition, cultists can gain the Spell Shield trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Spell Leech trait.

Spell Shield. This creature gains advantage on saving throws against spells. If it succeeds on such a saving throw, it gains temporary hit points equal to the spell's level.

Spell Leech. As a bonus action, this creature chooses one ally it can see within 30 feet of it. The target loses its lowest-level spell slot, and this creature gains it.

Cult of Zariel

Goals: Conquest, glory in battle, fame and fortune derived from military conquest

Typical Cultist: Berserker, cult fanatic, cultist, gladiator, guard, knight, veteran

Signature Spells: *True strike* (cantrip), *heroism* (1st level), *spiritual weapon* (2nd level), *crusader's mantle* (3rd level)

Zariel's cult offers martial training and talent. It flourishes in areas wracked by war. Refugees with the will to fight but lacking experience are drawn to Zariel, as she can provide them with the skills needed to survive. Established warriors looking for an edge are otherwise her most common recruits.

Knightly orders, fighters' guilds, and mercenary companies are the most likely to come under her sway. Hobgoblins sometimes turn to her, but only if they have escaped the influence of Maglubiyet and his priests.

Zariel gifts her followers with martial prowess. For example, a simple peasant might gain the abilities of a veteran. In addition, cultists can gain the Ferocious Surge trait. Cult leaders can also gain the Infernal Tactics trait.

Ferocious Surge (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). When this creature hits with an attack that isn't a critical hit, it can turn the hit into a critical hit.

Infernal Tactics. This creature has a keen eye for seizing a tactical advantage. Immediately after rolling initiative, it can choose itself and up to three allies it can see if it isn't incapacitated. It can swap the initiative results of the chosen creatures among them.

Demonic Boons

Wicked folk who seek power from demons are scattered across the multiverse. Some of them gather in cults, but many of them act on their own or in small groups. Whatever their organization, they are united in their desire to draw power from the bottomless evil of the Abyss.

The following entries outline boons that a DM can grant to monsters and NPCs dedicated to a particular demon lord. The entries also list signature spells associated with a demon lord. If the monster or NPC can cast spells, you can replace any of those spells with spells from that list, as long as the new spell is of the same level as the spell it replaces.

A demon can impart boons to a number of creatures equal to the number of Hit Dice it has. In contrast, demon lords have no limit on the number of creatures that can receive their boons.

Boons from demons are fickle gifts. They remain in place only so long as the demon is pleased. Accepting such a boon is a damning act that corrupts the soul and drives a person toward acts of chaos, evil, and madness. Rejecting a boon likely provokes a demon's wrath.

Baphomet

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Strength, Wisdom, or both

Signature Spells: *Hunter's mark* (1st level), *beast sense* (2nd level), *slow* (3rd level)

Baphomet grants the gifts of cunning and physical power. He grants his rank and file followers the Unerring Tracker trait, and cult leaders gain the Incite the Hunters trait. All of his devotees also gain the Labyrinthine Recall trait.

Unerring Tracker. As a bonus action, this creature magically creates a psychic link with one creature it can

see. For the next hour, as a bonus action this creature learns the current distance and direction to the target if it is on the same plane of existence. The link ends if this creature is incapacitated or if it uses this ability on a different target.

Incite the Hunters (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As an action, this creature allows each ally within 30 feet of it that has the Unerring Tracker trait to make one weapon attack as a reaction against the target of that ally's Unerring Tracker.

Labyrinthine Recall. This creature can perfectly recall any path it has traveled.

Demogorgon

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Strength, Charisma, or both

Signature Spells: *Charm person* (1st level), *enlarge/reduce* (2nd level), *vampiric touch* (3rd level)

Demogorgon's followers are typically lone killers driven by the whispering voice of their master. His most blessed followers gain the Two Minds of Madness trait.

Two Minds of Madness. This creature has advantage on all Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma saving throws.

Fraz-Urb'luu

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Wisdom, Charisma, or both

Signature Spells: *Minor illusion* (cantrip), *disguise self* (1st level), *invisibility* (2nd level), *hypnotic pattern* (3rd level)

As a master of deceit, Fraz-Urb'luu teaches his initiates the secrets of lies and illusions. They can also gain the Liar's Eye trait.

Liar's Eye. This creature has advantage on Wisdom (Insight or Perception) checks.

As a bonus action, it automatically detects the location of all illusions and hidden creatures within 15 feet of it.

Graz'zt

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Constitution, Charisma, or both

Signature Spells: *False life* (1st level), *hold person* (2nd level), *fear* (3rd level)

The Lord of Forbidden Pleasures grants his cultists the ability to transform even the most hideous pain into pleasure. His cultists gain the Joy from Pain trait, while his cult leaders gain the Master of Pleasures trait.

Joy from Pain. Whenever this creature suffers a critical hit, it can make one melee weapon attack as a reaction.

Master of Pleasures. As a reaction when this creature takes damage, it can magically grant 5 temporary hit points to itself and up to three allies within 30 feet of it.

Juiblex

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +8 bonus to Constitution, with an equal penalty to Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma

Signature Spells: None

The Faceless Lord's followers are bizarre loners who prefer the company of slimes and oozes to other creatures. They gain the hardiness of a slime at the cost of their minds. Lesser followers gain the Liquid Movement trait. The most dedicated devotees of ooze also gain the Slimy Organs trait.

Liquid Movement. As an action, this creature can move up to 20 feet through spaces no more than an inch in diameter. It must end this movement in a space that can accommodate its full size. Otherwise, it takes 5 force damage and returns to the space where it began this movement.

Slimy Organs. This creature has resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.

Whenever it suffers a critical hit or is reduced to 0 hit points, all creatures within 5 feet of it take acid damage equal to its number of Hit Dice.

Orcus

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Intelligence, Wisdom, or both

Signature Spells: *False life* (1st level), *ray of enfeeblement* (2nd level), *animate dead* (3rd level)

In most cases, Orcus transforms his followers into undead creatures such as ghouls and wights. Sometimes he needs his followers to retain their mortal forms, to more easily infiltrate a kingdom or city. He grants rank and file cultists the

Undying Soul trait, and his cult leaders gain the Aura of Death trait.

Undying Soul (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). If this creature is reduced to 0 hit points, it immediately makes a DC 10 Constitution saving throw. If it succeeds, it is instead reduced to 1 hit point.

Aura of Death. This creature emanates a deathly aura that extends 30 feet in every direction from its space while it isn't incapacitated. The aura is blocked by total cover. While in the aura, the creature and any friendly undead are immune to the frightened condition and have resistance to radiant damage. Enemies suffer disadvantage on death saving throws while in the aura.

Yeenoghu

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Strength and Dexterity, with an equal penalty to Intelligence and Charisma

Signature Spells: *Tasha's hideous laughter* (1st level), *crown of madness* (2nd level), *fear* (3rd level)

Yeenoghu's followers form roving packs of cannibalistic marauders. They grow more like gnolls in temperament and action with each passing day. His most devoted followers gain the Gnashing Jaws action option and the Rampage trait, while cult leaders gain the Aura of Bloodthirst trait.

Gnashing Jaws. Melee Weapon Attack: bonus to hit equal to this creature's proficiency bonus plus its Strength modifier, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 1d4 + this creature's Strength modifier piercing damage.

Rampage. When this creature reduces a creature to 0 hit points with a melee attack on its turn, it can take a bonus action to move up to half its speed and make its Gnashing Jaws attack once.

Aura of Bloodthirst. If this creature isn't incapacitated, any creature with the Rampage trait can make its Gnashing Jaws attack as a bonus action while within 10 feet of this creature.

Zugtmoy

Ability Score Adjustment: Up to a +4 bonus to Constitution, with an equal penalty to Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma

Signature Spells: None

Zugtmoy's followers are primarily mindless victims of her children's strange spores. The spores burrow into a victim's brain, turning it into a fanatic servitor. They gain the Spore Kissed trait.

Spore Kissed. This creature is immune to the charmed and frightened conditions. In addition, if it is reduced to 0 hit points, each creature within 10 feet of it takes poison damage equal to its number of Hit Dice.

Other Demons

Demons of sufficient cunning and power can attempt to form their own cults, using them as pawns against their enemies. A demon can grant a special trait based on its type, as shown below.

Balor

Fiery Soul. This creature has resistance to fire damage. When it dies, it explodes; each creature within 10 feet of it takes fire damage equal to its number of Hit Dice.

Goristro

Labyrinthine Recall. This creature can perfectly recall any path it has traveled.

Marilith

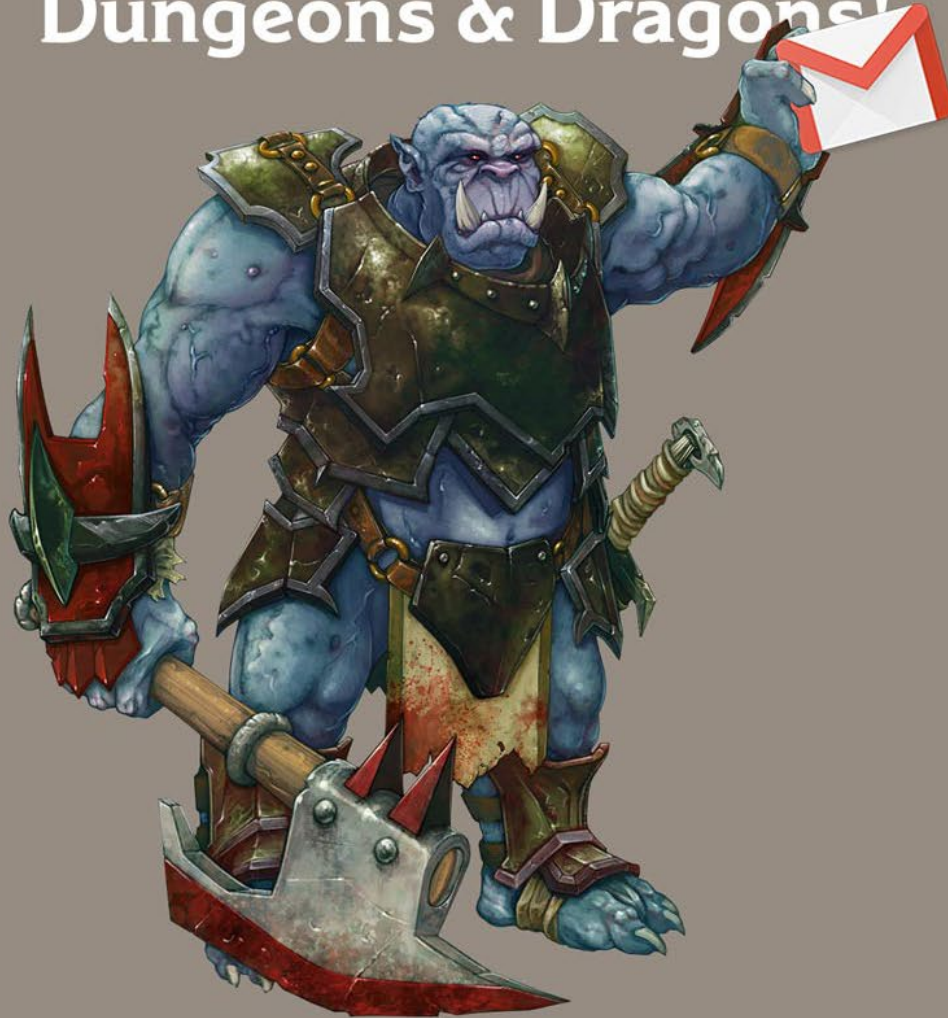
Serpentine Reaction. This creature can take a second reaction each round.

Nalfeshnee

Guarded Mind. This creature is immune to the frightened condition.



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Next Issue: Dragon+ 17

Check out this preview of Issue 17



There's a distinctly holiday feel to *Dragon+* Issue 17. We'll be tapping into the generous streak of lawful good-aligned shoppers with our amazing gift guide (while also stoking the selfish desires of the chaotic neutral among you: "Want! Mine!").

If you prefer to gift from the heart at this time of year, we'll be taking a look at your kind of person, as we highlight the work of some truly talented craftspeople.



Even the big day itself refuses to cave in to terrible TV and turkey leftovers, thanks to our brand new holiday scenario for *Betrayal at Baldur's Gate*! Meanwhile, MMORPG *Neverwinter* invades the tabletop, as epic digital quest *The Crypts of Kelemvor* becomes a

standalone TRPG module.

There's all this, plus another delve into the imposing *Dragon* archive, and all our regulars like Unearthed Arcana, maps of the month, a selection of the best D&D video and audio highlights, and much more!

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